

K A D I N G I R - R A

THE STORY OF THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

BY

WALTER STAFFORD SWETNAM



KA DINGIR-RA

THE STORY OF THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

BY

WALTER STAFFORD SWETNAM



KA DINGIR-RA

THE STORY OF THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

KIT

PREFACE

THE ESSENTIAL FACTS OF THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY ARE WELL KNOWN:

1. THE NORTHERN KINGDOM, ISRAEL, (CAPITAL SAMARIA) WAS DESTROYED BY ASSYRIA IN 722 B. C., ITS PEOPLE SCATTERED SO WIDELY THAT THEY HAVE COME TO BE CALLED THE LOST TEN TRIBES OF ISRAEL.

2. BABEL (BABYLON, BABYLON) WAS THE SITE OF A REVOLUTION UNDER NABOPOLASSAR, RESULTING IN THE DOWNFALL OF ASSYRIA, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHALDEAN, OR BABYLONIAN, EMPIRE IN 608 B. C.

3. PHARAOH Necho, of Egypt, HOPING TO CRUSH THE NEWLY EMERGED EMPIRE, LAUNCHED A CAMPAIGN, PASSING THROUGH JUDAH. JOSIAH, KING OF JUDAH, A VASSAL OF NABOPOLASSAR, ATTEMPTED TO HALT THE INVASION, AND WAS KILLED IN BATTLE. HIS SON JEHOIAHAZ SUCCEEDED HIM. THE VICTORIOUS EGYPTIANS DEPOSED JEHOIAHAZ AND SENT HIM TO EGYPT, A PRISONER. THEY MADE PRO-EGYPT JEHOIAKIM KING, AND PURSUED THEIR INVASION OF SYRIA. THE EGYPTIAN ARMY WAS UTTERLY ROUTED AT CARCHEMISH BY NEBUCHADREZZAR (NEBUCHADNEZZAR, NABUCHODONOSOR).

4. IN 606 B. C. THE ARMIES OF BABEL RETURNED TO JERUSALEM, LAID JEHOIAKIM UNDER TRIBUTE, AND TOOK HOSTAGES, INCLUDING DANIEL.

5. IN 605 B. C. NEBUCHADREZZAR BECAME KING.

6. IN 597 B. C. JEHOIAKIM, CONFIDING IN ASSISTANCE FROM EGYPT WHICH NEVER CAME, REVOLTED AGAINST BABEL. NEBUCHADREZZAR INVESTED JERUSALEM. IN THIS CRISIS JEHOIAKIM DIED, HIS EIGHTEEN YEAR OLD SON JECONIAH (CONIAH, JEHOIACHIN) WAS CROWNED KING, AND FOUND NO RECOURSE BUT SURRENDER. HE WAS DEPOSED AND TAKEN TO BABYLON, ALONG WITH ABOUT 10,000 OF THE BETTER CLASS PEOPLE OF JUDAH. JECONIAH WAS MADE A PRISONER, BUT THE PEOPLE WERE WELL TREATED, ALLOWED TO SETTLE THEMSELVES. JECONIAH SENT A LETTER TO THEM, ADVISING THEM TO COOPERATE WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF BABEL. EZEKIEL, A YOUNG PRIEST, STRONGLY SECONDED JEREMIAH'S PLEA. IN JERUSALEM AN UNCLE OF JECONIAH WAS MADE KING, ZEDEKIAH BY NAME.

7. IN 588 B. C. ZEDEKIAH REVOLTED, STILL TRUSTING IN EGYPT. THE BABYLONIANS SURROUNDED JERUSALEM, AND AFTER A LONG SIEGE THE CITY WAS TAKEN AND COMPLETELY DESTROYED. A FEW HUNDRED MORE CAPTIVES WERE TAKEN TO BABYLON.

8. IN 560 B. C., AT THE DEATH OF NEBUCHADREZZAR, HIS SON EVIL-MERDUK BECAME KING, SET JECONIAH FREE, AND SHOWED HIM HONOR.

9. IN 539 B. C. BABYLON WAS CAPTURED BY THE MEDES AND PERSIANS UNDER CYRUS. CYRUS GAVE THE JEWS PERMISSION AND ASSISTANCE TO RETURN TO THEIR LAND. ABOUT 50,000 OF THEM MADE THE LONG TREK AND BEGAN THE LONG AND DIFFICULT TASK OF RESTORING THEIR CITY AND NATION.

JO-ZADAK WAS A REAL PERSON, A PRIEST, FATHER OF YESHUA, THE FIRST HIGH PRIEST AFTER THE RESTORATION. OF HIS ACTIVITIES DURING THIS TIME THE BIBLE TELLS US NOTHING. I BELIEVE MY ACCOUNT IS CONSISTENT WITH KNOWN HISTORY.

WHOEVER WROTE ISAIAH 40-55 TELLS US NOTHING ABOUT HIMSELF. MY GUESS THAT HE WAS A SON OF DANIEL IS ONLY A GUESS. IT IS CERTAIN THAT HE WROTE DURING THIS PERIOD, SOME OF THE MOST SUBLIME POETRY EVER WRITTEN.

DALLAS, TEXAS, AUGUST, 1983

P R O L O G U E

ONCE UPON A TOWER

"AND THE WHOLE EARTH WAS OF ONE LANGUAGE AND OF ONE SPEECH. AND I CAME TO PASS, AS THEY JOURNEYED FROM THE EAST, THAT THEY FOUND A PLAIN IN THE LAND OF SHINAR; AND THEY DWELT THERE. AND THEY SAID ONE TO ANOTHER, GO TO, LET US MAKE BRICK, AND BURN THEM THOROUGHLY. AND THEY HAD BRICK FOR STONE, AND SLIME (BITUMEN) THEY HAD FOR MORTAR.

AND THEY SAID, GO TO, LET US BUILD US A CITY AND A TOWER, WHOSE TOP MAY REACH UNTO HEAVEN; AND LET US MAKE A NAME, LEST WE BE SCATTERED ABROAD UPON THE FACE OF THE WHOLE EARTH.

AND THE LORD CAME DOWN TO SEE THE CITY AND THE TOWER, WHICH THE CHILDREN OF MEN BUILT. AND THE LORD SAID, BEHOLD, THE PEOPLE IS ONE, AND THEY HAVE ALL ONE LANGUAGE; AND THIS THEY BEGIN TO DO; AND NOW NOTHING WILL BE RESTRAINED FROM THEM, WHICH THEY HAVE IMAGINED TO DO. GO TO, LET US GO DOWN, AND THERE CONFOUND THEIR LANGUAGE, THAT THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER'S SPEECH.

SO THE LORD SCATTERED THEM ABROAD FROM THENCE UPON THE FACE OF ALL THE EARTH: AND THEY LEFT OFF TO BUILD THE CITY. THEREFORE IS THE NAME OF IT CALLED BABEL; BECAUSE THE LORD DID THERE CONFOUND THE LANGUAGE OF ALL THE EARTH: AND FROM THENCE DID THE LORD SCATTER THEM ABROAD UPON THE FACE OF ALL THE EARTH." — GENESIS 11:1-9

IN THE GENESIS ACCOUNT THE NAME BABEL APPEARS TO BE DERIVED FROM THE HEBREW WORD BIL, WHICH MEANS TO BE CONFUSED; BUT IN GENESIS 10:10 THE CITY IS MENTIONED IN CONNECTION WITH NINEVEH, ASSHUR, AND OTHER CITIES; AND THROUGHOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT BABEL IS THE NAME OF THE GREAT AND CELEBRATED CITY, THE GREATEST CITY OF ITS TIME.

THE GREAT PLAIN OF THE TIGRIS AND EUPHRATES RIVERS WAS CALLED BY THE HEBREWS SHINAR, PROBABLY A CORRUPTION OF SUMER. THE EARLIEST KNOWN INHABITANTS CALLED IT SUMER, AND THEY ARE KNOWN IN HISTORY AS SUMERIANS. OF THEIR MANY CAPITAL CITIES, ONE BECAME THE MOST PROMINENT. THEY CALLED IT KA DINGIR-RA, GATE OF GOD.

"LET US MAKE BRICK, AND LET US BURN THEM THOROUGHLY." CLAY WAS ABUNDANT, BUILDING STONE SCARCE. IT BECAME A CULTURE OF CLAY. AND IT WAS NATURAL THAT THE SYSTEM OF WRITING THAT AROSE THERE SHOULD MAKE USE OF CLAY. FROM A BEGINNING OF RUDE PICTOGRAPHS IT HAD DEVELOPED, BY THE TIME OF ABRAHAM, (C. 2,200 B. C.) INTO A HIGHLY SOPHISTICATED SYSTEM OF WRITING, ITS COMPLICATED CHARACTERS BEING WRITTEN ON CLAY TABLETS WITH WEDGE SHAPED STYLI, SO THAT IT CAME TO BE CALLED CUNEIFORM, FROM LATIN CUNEUS, A WEDGE.

AND THERE WAS A LANGUAGE PROBLEM. ANOTHER PEOPLE APPEARED ON THE SCENE, A SEMITIC PEOPLE, WHO CALLED THEMSELVES AKKADIANS. HISTORY GIVES NO RECORD OF A SUDDEN OVERTHROW OF POWER. GRADUALLY, IT WOULD SEEM, THE AKKADIANS TOOK OVER THE SUMERIAN CULTURE, AND BECAME THE DOMINANT PEOPLE. AND THE SYSTEM OF WRITING THEY TOOK OVER AND APPLIED TO THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, PRESERVING THE PHONETIC VALUES OF THE SUMERIAN CHARACTERS AND USING THEM TO FORM WORDS IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, WHICH WAS A TRULY SEMITIC LANGUAGE, RECOGNIZABLY KIN TO HEBREW, NOW GENERALLY CALLED ASSYRIAN.

THE NAME OF THE CAPITAL CITY THEY TRANSLATED INTO THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, CALLING IT BAB-ILU, GATE OF GOD. (LATER THE GREEKS ADDED AN N, SO THAT IN MODERN SPEECH WE SAY BABYLON.) BUT ALTHOUGH THEY CALLED IT BAB-ILU, THEY CONTINUED TO WRITE THE ANCIENT SYMBOLS, KA DINGIR-RA.

THERE WAS A TOWER, TOO. IT WAS CALLED A ZIGGURAT. APPARENTLY IT HAD A DEEP RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE. THERE WAS A ZIGGURAT IN UR, THE CITY FROM WHICH ABRAHAM CAME. PERHAPS HE HAD TOLD OF IT IN THE FAMILY. IT MUST HAVE BEEN THOUGHT OF AS A MEANS OF ACCESS TO THE DEITY — A GATE, SO TO SPEAK. WHEN JACOB HAD HIS DREAM OF A LADDER (TOWER?) REACHING TO HEAVEN HE AWOKES FILLED WITH AWE, SAYING, "THIS IS NONE OTHER BUT THE HOUSE OF GOD. THIS IS THE GATE OF HEAVEN." (GENESIS 28:17)

GATE OF GOD — BAB-ILU — THE HEBREWS CALLED IT BABEL. THE OLD WAY OF WRITING IT PERSISTED, HOWEVER. MANY CENTURIES AFTER ABRAHAM'S TIME THE GREAT KING NABU-UD-KUDURRI-USUR, CALLED NABUCHODONOSOR BY THE GREEKS, AND BY THE HEBREWS SOMETIMES NEBUCHADNEZZAR AND AT OTHER TIMES NESUCHADREZZAR, IN HIS ANNALS, STILL PRESERVED, REFERRED TO HIMSELF AS KING OF BAB-ILU. BUT HE WROTE THE ANCIENT SYMBOLS, KA DINGIR-RA.

THE LETTER

THE SPRING NIGHT WAS WARM. THE FIRST QUARTER MOON HUNG LOW IN THE WESTERN SKY, LEAVING MOST OF THE STREET IN SHADOW, BUT STILL AFFORDING ENOUGH LIGHT FOR ME TO SEE MY WAY. I HAD BEEN AT THE HOME OF MY COUSIN HANANI, PLAYING A GAME WE CALLED DURIM, PLAYED WITH STONE BALLS ON A SMOOTH STONE SLAB. OUR FRIEND ANUKIS, THE SON OF THE EGYPTIAN AMBASSADOR, HAD TAUGHT US THE GAME, ONE HE SAID WAS POPULAR IN EGYPT. WE HAD SPENT MANY HOURS MOUNTING THE SLAB, AND GETTING IT SMOOTH AND LEVEL. HANANI'S TWELVE YEAR OLD SISTER JERUCHA PLAYED WITH US. WHEN THE MOON WAS LOW ENOUGH TO PUT OUR TABLE IN SHADOW I DECIDED IT WAS TIME FOR ME TO GO HOME.

I WALKED THROUGH THE STREETS, WHISTLING CHEERFULLY. TRUE, TIMES WERE SAID TO BE TROUBLED, AND MY OWN FUTURE CAREER WAS UNCERTAIN, BUT I HAD JUST HAD MY BIRTHDAY SIXTEEN, AND LIFE WAS ALL BEFORE ME, WITH PROMISE OF ADVENTURE. WHO COULD TELL WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN? MY ONLY IMMEDIATE CONCERN WAS THAT MY MOTHER MIGHT SCOLD BECAUSE I WAS LATE.

THE DOOR WAS BARRED, MY MOTHER CAME AT MY KNOCK. THE SERVANTS WERE GONE. "YOU'RE LATE," SHE SAID. "THE OTHER CHILDREN ARE ALREADY ASLEEP."

"NOT VERY LATE, [MM], I SAID. "THE MOON IS NOT DOWN YET."

MY FATHER WAS SEATED AT A TABLE IN THE NEXT ROOM, A PAPER SPREAD OUT BEFORE HIM. "COME IN HERE, JO-ZADAK," HE SAID. "THIS BUSINESS CONCERNS YOU TOO." HE SEEMED TROUBLED, AND I COULD SEE THAT MY MOTHER HAD BEEN CRYING.

I PULLED A STOOL UP TO THE TABLE, AND WAITED. THE PAPER APPEARED TO BE A LETTER, AND I SAW THAT MY FATHER WAS MAKING A COPY OF IT. HE FINISHED THE COPY, THEN PASSED THE LETTER TO ME. "READ THAT," HE SAID.

THE LETTER WAS IN HEBREW. A QUICK GLANCE TOLD ME THAT THE COPY HE HAD JUST FINISHED WAS IN ARAMAIC. "WHY THE ARAMAIC?" I ASKED, POINTING TO IT.

"READ IT AND YOU'LL SEE," HE SAID. "SOME PEOPLE MAY NEED TO SEE IT WHO DON'T READ HEBREW."

I STARTED READING. "JEREMIAH, TO THE EXILES OF JUDAH, IN THE LAND OF THEIR CAPTIVITY....."

I KNEW, OF COURSE, THAT ARAMAIC HAD BECOME A SECOND LANGUAGE TO ALL THE EDUCATED PEOPLE IN OUR PART OF THE WORLD, EVEN IN EGYPT AND BABEL, THOUGH THE EGYPTIANS PERSISTED IN WRITING THEIR CRAZY PICTURE LANGUAGE, AND THE AKKADIANS CLUNG TO THEIR ANTIQUATED WRITING IN CLAY. THERE WAS NO PROBLEM TO ME; I HAD SPOKEN IT FROM INFANCY, AND READ IT AS EASILY AS HEBREW.

"THUS SAYS YAHWEH TSVATH, GOD OF ISRAEL TO ALL THE EXILES WHOM I HAVE SENT INTO EXILE FROM JERUSALEM TO BABEL: BUILD HOUSES, AND LIVE IN THEM, PLANT GARDENS, AND EAT THEIR PRODUCE, TAKE WIVES, AND HAVE SONS AND DAUGHTERS.....MULTIPLY THERE, AND DO NOT DECREASE. BUT SEEK THE WELFARE OF THE CITY WHERE I HAVE SENT YOU INTO EXILE, AND PRAY TO YAHWEH ON ITS BEHALF, FOR IN ITS WELFARE YOU WILL FIND YOUR WELFARE..... FOR THUS SAYS YAHWEH: WHEN SEVENTY YEARS ARE COMPLETED FOR BABEL I WILL VISIT YOU, AND I WILL FULFIL MY PROMISE, AND BRING YOU BACK TO THIS PLACE....." THERE WAS A LOT MORE. I READ IT THROUGH. OF COURSE I KNEW WHO JEREMIAH WAS; HE HAD OFTEN BEEN A GUEST IN OUR HOME, AND WE WERE ALL CONVINCED THAT HE HAD A REAL REVELATION FROM GOD. WE HELD HIM IN THE HIGHEST RESPECT, AND HAD BEEN AT THE CRUEL TREATMENT HE HAD SUFFERED DURING JEHOIAKIM'S REIGN. I HANDED THE LETTER BACK TO MY FATHER.

MY FATHER WAS A PRIEST. HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN HIGH PRIEST, AS HIS FATHER HAD BEEN, AFTER HIS BROTHER AZARIAH WAS CARRIED AWAY AMONG THE CAPTIVES, TWO YEARS BEFORE THIS; BUT POLITICAL PRESSURE HAD PUT IN A COUSIN NAMED ZEPHANIAH AS HIGH PRIEST, AND MY FATHER WAS VERY BITTER ABOUT IT. AND OF COURSE I WAS DESTINED TO BE A PRIEST — ALL THE DESCENDANTS OF AARON WERE SUPPOSED TO BE COHENIM.

"JEREMIAH FEELS THAT THE FUTURE OF OUR NATION IS WITH THOSE EXILES," MY FATHER SAID. "HE KNOWS THAT THE KING IS PLOTTING WITH THE EGYPTIANS, AND HE IS CONVINCED THAT IF THEY TRY ANOTHER REBELLION NEBUCHADREZZAR WILL DESTROY THIS PLACE COMPLETELY. THE ONLY HOPE IS IN THE EXILES."

"IT WAS A CRUEL THING TO TAKE ALL THOSE PEOPLE SO FAR AWAY," MY MOTHER SAID, WEeping AGAIN.

"YES, BUT IT COULD HAVE BEEN A LOT WORSE," MY FATHER ANSWERED. "THEY COULD HAVE KILLED THEM ALL. OR THEY COULD HAVE MADE SLAVES OF THEM, SOLD THEM TO SLAVE DEALERS WHO WOULD HAVE SCATTERED THEM NO TELLING WHERE. I THINK THIS YOUNG KING NEBUCHADREZZAR HAS BEEN REMARKABLY CONSIDERATE."

THE LETTER THAT AZARIAH SENT SAID THAT THEY HAD BEEN GIVEN PLACES TO STAY, AND OPPORTUNITIES TO WORK AND EARN A LIVING. I GAVE THE LETTER TO JEREMIAH. MAYBE THAT IS WHAT CAUSED HIM TO WRITE THIS LETTER.

"BUT HE SAYS IN THE LETTER THAT IT WAS YAHWEH WHO TOLD HIM TO WRITE IT," I PROTESTED.

"I'M SURE IT WAS," MY FATHER AGREED, "BUT MAYBE I HELPED A LITTLE." I SUDDENLY REMEMBERED SOMETHING. "I SAW EBNATHAN AT THE EGYPTIAN AMBASSADOR'S HOUSE YESTERDAY," I SAID.

"WHAT WERE YOU DOING THERE?"

"I WAS VISITING MY FRIEND ANUKIS, THE AMBASSADOR'S SON."

"THERE'S BOUND TO BE SOME PLOTTING GOING ON," MY FATHER SAID. "I WISH NEBUCHADREZZAR COULD HAVE LET JECONIAH CONTINUE AS KING. HE WASN'T THE ONE WHO REBELLED, IT WAS HIS FATHER; AND WHEN HIS FATHER DIED JUST AS THE SIEGE BEGAN JECONIAH SURRENDERED — IT WAS ALL HE COULD DO — AND IF COULD US PLENTY; BUT IF HE HAD BEEN LEFT IN CHARGE I AM SURE HE WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE TRUSTWORTHY THAN WHAT WE'VE GOT. I KNEW MATTANIAH'S MOTHER, HANMEL."

HER NAME SHOULD HAVE BEEN HIRMAR, FOR SHE WAS TREACHERY, THROUGH AND THROUGH. AND SO WAS HER SON. AND STILL IS. CHANGING HIS NAME TO JECONIAH DIDN'T HELP A BIT. AND IF HE DOES TRY ANOTHER REBELLION WE ARE DOOMED.

"HUSH, GEMARIAH!" MOTHER SAID. "IF ANYBODY SHOULD HEAR YOU...."

"THEY WON'T," MY FATHER SAID. "BUT ANYWAY, OUR PROBLEM RIGHT NOW IS THIS LETTER."

"WHAT ABOUT THE LETTER?" I ASKED. "IT SOUNDS LIKE A VERY GOOD LETTER TO ME."

"IT IS A GOOD LETTER. THE PROBLEM IS THAT JEREMIAH HAS ASKED ME TO TAKE IT — ME AND ELASA." ELASA WAS A LEVITE, THE FATHER OF MY FRIEND HANANI, HIS WIFE, WHO HAD DIED A YEAR BEFORE THIS, WAS A FIRST COUSIN OF MY MOTHER.

"YOU MEAN TAKE IT BABEL?" I ASKED, DUMBFOUNDED.

"YES, THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS. RIGHT AFTER THE PASSOVER THE ANNUAL TRIBUTE IS TO BE SENT TO BABEL. THE RAS-SHEKAN WILL GO IN PERSON TO TAKE IT, AND DELAIAH AND JERUDI WILL GO WITH HIM AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE KING, AND THE PLAN IS THAT ELASA AND I ARE TO GO WITH THEM, AND DELIVER THIS LETTER TO THE EXILES. IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THEM TO RECEIVE IT, AND OF COURSE WE COULD NOT TRUST THOSE FELLOWS TO DELIVER IT."

I GAVE A GASP. "OH?" I CRIED. "THAT'S ONLY TEN DAYS!"

"VERY LITTLE TIME TO MAKE READY."

I BEGAN TO SEE, OR THOUGHT I DID, WHAT HE MEANT WHEN HE SAID THIS CONCERNED ME. "AND YOU MEAN THAT YOU WANT ME TO LOOK AFTER THINGS WHILE YOU ARE AWAY?" I ASKED.

"NO," HE REPLIED SOLEMNLY. "I PLAN TO TAKE YOU WITH ME -- YOU AND TAMAR BOTH."

THAT WAS A SHOCKER. "AND WHAT ABOUT MOTHER? AND SHIMEATH? AND JERIDAH? AND GRANDMOTHER? ARE THEY ALL GOING TOO?"

"NO, THEY WILL HAVE TO STAY HERE. IF IT WERE NOT FOR YOUR GRANDMOTHER, WE MIGHT TRY IT. BUT SHE COULD NOT POSSIBLY STAND SUCH A TRIP. IT'S A TERRIBLE THING TO DIVIDE THE FAMILY, BUT WE HAVE BEEN TALKING IT OVER, YOUR MOTHER AND I, AND THIS IS THE ONLY WAY WE CAN SEE TO DO IT."

"HOW LONG WILL WE BE GONE?"

"I DON'T KNOW. IT MAY WELL BE THAT WE WILL NEVER COME BACK." AND NOW MY FATHER BEGAN TO WEEP.

BUT MY MOTHER, WHO HAD BEEN WEEPING BEFORE, NOW SEEMED TO TAKE ON NEW STRENGTH. I HAD ALWAYS FELT THAT SHE WAS A STRONG WOMAN. BUT IN THAT MOMENT SHE SEEMED ALMOST HEROIC. "YES, IT'S TERRIBLE," SHE SAID, "BUT WE CAN DO IT. THE SURVIVAL OF GOD'S PEOPLE IS VITALLY IMPORTANT. AND THE SURVIVAL OF THIS FAMILY IS IMPORTANT TOO. I HATE FOR US TO BE DIVIDED, BUT DIVIDED WE HAVE A DOUBLE CHANCE FOR SURVIVAL. WHO CAN TELL WHERE THE DANGER IS GREATER, FOR YOU ON THIS PERILOUS JOURNEY, OR FOR US HERE? YOU, FAR AWAY IN ANOTHER LAND, MAY BE ABLE TO CARRY ON THE FAMILY, OR IF NOT, PERHAPS SHIMEATH, HERE, CAN CARRY IT ON. OR MAYBE BOTH OF YOU, I HOPE SO. BUT DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME. I CAN COPE WITH THINGS HERE. IF IT IS YAHWEH'S WILL THAT WE BE SEPARATED FOREVER, WE CAN FACE IT. BUT IF, BY HIS MERCY, WE CAN BE TOGETHER AGAIN, IT WILL BE A GREAT JOY."

I HAD ANOTHER THOUGHT. "YOU SAID ELASA WAS TO GO WITH US -- WHAT ABOUT HANANI AND JERUSAH?" ELASA HAD NOT REMARRIED AFTER HIS WIFE'S DEATH.

"THEY WILL BE GOING TOO. ELASA AND I TALKED IT OVER THIS AFTERNOON."

I WAS GLAD TO HEAR THAT. HANANI HAD BEEN MY BEST FRIEND FOR A LONG TIME, AND WHILE IT WAS EARLY YET TO HAVE SERIOUS THOUGHTS OF LEAVING, I WAS VERY FOND OF THE KID. BUT WHEN I THOUGHT OF LEAVING, PERHAPS FOREVER, FROM MY MOTHER, IT WAS A FRIGHTENING IDEA. SHIMEATH -- I OFTEN CONSIDERED MY TEN YEAR-OLD BROTHER A PEST, BUT I FEELY CARED A LOT ABOUT HIM. AND LITTLE JERIDAH, I WAS FOND OF THE LITTLE TYKE, EVEN IF SHE DID GET ON MY NERVES AT TIMES. IT WOULD BE A TERRIBLE THING TO LEAVE THEM.

"WELL," MY FATHER SAID, "THAT'S THE WAY YAHWEH HAS WILLED IT. YOU'LL HAVE TO FACE IT. THE GOAT IS GONE. IT IS A DUTY THAT CANNOT BE SHIRKED. WHATEVER THE DANGER. AT WHATEVER THE COST. SEPARATED OR TOGETHER, WE ARE ALWAYS IN YAHWEH'S HANDS. AND YOU'LL FIND THAT HE WILL WANT TO REDEEM US."

WE SAID OUR GOODNIGHTS AND WENT TO OUR BEDS. I THOUGHT I WOULD NEVER GET TO SLEEP WITH THE THOUGHT OF THE PROSPECT OF A JOURNEY, A LONG JOURNEY. ALL THE WAY TO BABEL! WHAT WOULD THE JOURNEY BE LIKE? WHAT WOULD THE PEACOCKS LIKE? WHAT WOULD WE DO WHEN WE GOT THERE? AND WHAT WOULD MY MOTHER, AND MY LITTLE BROTHER AND SISTER, DO HERE? HOW COULD I EVER GO TO SLEEP, THINKING ABOUT IT?

BUT I MUST HAVE, FOR THE NEXT THING I KNEW, THE SUN WAS SHINING,

PASSOVER

BESIDES BEING A PRIEST, MY FATHER WAS A JEWELER. ALL THE PRIESTS SHARED IN THE TEMPLE OFFERINGS, EITHER IN COMMODITIES OR IN MONEY, FOR MANY OF THE ANIMALS AND OTHER THINGS OFFERED IN SACRIFICE WERE SOLD, AND THE PROFITS WERE DISTRIBUTED ACCORDING TO A SCALE, DEPENDING ON THE RANK OF THE PRIEST AND THE AMOUNT OF TIME HE WAS CALLED ON TO SERVE IN THE TEMPLE. BUT ALMOST ALL THE PRIESTS HAD OTHER OCCUPATIONS AS WELL. MY FATHER HAD A SHOP IN THE CITY, WHERE HE DID FINE ENGRAVING AND LAPIDARY WORK. HIS BROTHER AZARIAH HAD BEEN PARTNER WITH HIM IN THIS, UNTIL HE WAS CARRIED AWAY AMONG THE TEN THOUSAND, MORE OR LESS, WHO HAD BEEN TAKEN AWAY BY NESUCHADREZZAR TWO YEARS BEFORE. MY FATHER HAD TRIED TO TEACH ME HIS TRADE, AND PUT ME IN AS AN APPRENTICE RIGHT AFTER UNCLE AZARIAH WAS TAKEN AWAY. BUT WITHIN THREE MONTHS I WAS CONVINCED THAT I WOULD NEVER HAVE THE SKILL NEEDED FOR THAT SORT OF WORK. AND AT THE END OF A YEAR, EVEN MY FATHER, STUBBORN AS HE WAS, HAD TO ADMIT THAT I WOULD NEVER BE A JEWELER. SINCE THEN I HAD BEEN STUDYING WITH A TEACHER OF PHILOSOPHY, AND DOING SOME WORK AS A SCRIBE, STILL COMPLETELY UNCERTAIN AS TO WHAT MY LIFE WORK MIGHT BE.

BUT ONE GOOD THING CAME OUT OF THAT EXPERIENCE. MY FATHER HAD PURCHASED A GREEK SLAVE IN TYRE, A YOUNG MAN WHO, WHILE NOT THE SKILLED CRAFTSMAN MY FATHER WAS, STILL PROVED TO BE VERY USEFUL IN THE SHOP. HIS NAME WAS PATROCLOS; AND WHILE I WORKED THERE, VAINLY TRYING TO LEARN THE JEWELER'S ART, I LEARNED FROM PATROCLOS TO SPEAK AND WRITE THE GREEK LANGUAGE. LANGUAGE STUDY HAD ALWAYS FASCINATED ME; I HAD HAD ARAMAIC COMPANIONS FROM INFANCY, AND HAD GROWN UP BI-LINGUAL. AND FOR THE PAST YEAR I HAD WORKED VERY HARD WITH MY FRIEND ANUKIS, SON OF THE EGYPTIAN AMBASSADOR, AND HAD ATTAINED A FAIR COMMAND OF THE EGYPTIAN LANGUAGE.

ELASA WAS A LEVITE. HE WORKED IN THE TEMPLE, COPYING MANUSCRIPTS. EVER SINCE THE DISCOVERY OF THE LOST BOOK OF THE LAW, ABOUT TEN YEARS BEFORE I WAS BORN, THE DEMAND FOR COPIES OF THE ANCIENT BOOKS HAD BEEN VERY GREAT — THE TORAH, THE BOOKS OF HISTORY, AND THE COLLECTION OF SONGS, MANY OF THEM ATTRIBUTED TO DAVID. BESIDES THESE, THERE WERE SOME BOOKS BY THE PROPHETS, ISAIAH, AMOS, HOSEA, NAHUM AND MICAH. SOME OF THESE WERE OVER A CENTURY OLD, AND WERE BEGINNING TO BE VENERATED ALMOST LIKE THE TORAH. ISAIAH WAS THE LARGEST OF THESE. RICH PEOPLE LIKED TO HAVE COPIES OF ONE OR MORE OF THESE BOOKS IN THEIR HOMES, AND WOULD PAY A GOOD PRICE FOR THEM. THERE WAS A LOT OF COPYING TO BE DONE.

WITH ONLY TEN DAYS IN WHICH TO GET READY FOR THE BIG TRIP THERE WAS MUCH TO BE DONE IN PREPARATION.

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT THE SHOP?" I ASKED.

"I'M GOING TO TAKE SOME OF MY TOOLS WITH ME," FATHER ANSWERED, "AS MANY AS I CAN CARRY. THE SHOP, AND THE REST OF THE TOOLS, AND THE STOCK I CAN'T TAKE, I'LL LEAVE FOR PATROCLOS. I'M GIVING HIM HIS FREEDOM."

"GIVING IT TO HIM?" MOTHER ASKED.

"YES, GIVING IT TO HIM. HE HAS BEEN A GOOD WORKER, AND I THINK HE HAS EARNED IT. HE WILL KEEP THE SHOP GOING, AND GIVE YOU HALF THE PROFITS. HE MAY OFFER TO BUY THE SHOP EVENTUALLY. USE YOUR OWN JUDGMENT ABOUT IT."

I WAS PLEASED TO HEAR THAT. I LIKED PATROCLOS.

"I'M SURE I CAN MANAGE ALL RIGHT," MOTHER SAID. "I HAVE SOMETHING PUT BY, AND THERE WILL STILL BE SOMETHING COMING IN FROM THE TEMPLE. DON'T WORRY ABOUT US; WE'LL MAKE OUT, SOME WAY."

AND I FELT SURE SHE WOULD. MOTHER IS A VERY RESOURCEFUL WOMAN.

SOON BEGAN THE WEEK OF UNLEAVENED BREAD. WE CHILDREN ALWAYS LOOKED FORWARD TO THAT. IT WAS DIFFERENT, AND WE ENJOYED IT.

"WE'LL BE LIKE OUR FOREFATHERS LEAVING EGYPT," MY FATHER SAID. "WE WILL BE CARRYING ONLY UNLEAVENED BREAD."

"IT KEEPS BETTER THAN THE OTHER KIND," MOTHER SAID.

"BUT IF IT GETS OLD AND HARD, I WONDER IF MY OLD TEETH WILL TAKE IT," MY FATHER SAID, LAUGHING.

"SOAK IT IN WATER," MOTHER SAID.

"IF THERE IS ANY WATER, OUT IN THAT DESERT COUNTRY," SAID SHIMEATH.

"IF THERE'S NOT ANY WATER, WE WON'T MAKE IT," TAMAR SAID GRIMLY.

"OH, THERE'S BOUND TO BE WATER," FATHER REASSURED. "PEOPLE HAVE MADE THAT TRIP MANY TIMES BEFORE. OF COURSE THERE WILL BE WATER."

"I SURE HOPE SO," MOTHER SAID.

I WAS AT ELASA'S HOUSE THE DAY BEFORE THE PASSOVER. HANANI AND JERUSHA AND I WERE LOOKING AT THE BAGGAGE, PACKED FOR THE JOURNEY. I SAW ANOTHER CASE, THAT I HAD NOT SEEN BEFORE. "WHAT IS THAT?" I ASKED.

"BOOKS," HANANI SAID. "FATHER IS TAKING COPIES OF ALL THE HOLY BOOKS. HE SAID IF EVERYTHING IS DESTROYED HERE, THESE MIGHT BE THE ONLY COPIES TO SURVIVE," HE ADDED.

"THAT IS A HORRIBLE THOUGHT," I SAID. "THIS CITY, AND GOD'S HOLY TEMPLE, SURELY GOD WON'T LET THEM BE DESTROYED COMPLETELY!"

ELASA HAD COME IN WHILE WE WERE TALKING. "JEREMIAH SAYS IT WILL BE," HE SAID. "AND I THINK GOD HAS SHOWED MORE OF THE FUTURE TO HIM THAN HE HAS TO ANYBODY ELSE. HE SAID IT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE, AT SHILOH, BACK IN SAMUEL'S TIME, AND THAT IF OUR PEOPLE PERSIST IN DISOBEYING GOD'S LAW IT WILL HAPPEN AGAIN. I HATE TO LEAVE THIS PLACE, BUT IF DESTRUCTION IS COMING, I'D RATHER BE SOMEWHERE ELSE."

I THOUGHT OF THE ONES BEING LEFT BEHIND, MOTHER, AND SHIMEATH, AND JEDIDAH. THE THOUGHT MADE ME TREMBLE.

JERUSHA HELD UP A BULKY PACKAGE. "HERE IS THE MAKINGS OF ANOTHER BOOK," SHE SAID. "BARUCH BROUGHT IT TODAY. IT IS A LOT OF MANUSCRIPTS OF JEREMIAH'S SERMONS, AND HE WANTS THAT PRESERVED TOO."

THE DAY OF THE PASSOVER, FATHER BROUGHT IN THE LAMB IN THE AFTERNOON. IT HAD BEEN KILLED AT THE TEMPLE. MOTHER WAS GETTING READY TO PUT IT TO ROAST. "I HAVE INVITED ELASA, HANANI AND JERUSHA TO EAT WITH US," SHE SAID.

"WITH GRANDMOTHER, THAT WILL MAKE TEN OF US," I SAID. "I KNOW THERE IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE ANY OF THE MEAT LEFT OVER, BUT I AM SURE THAT HANANI AND I CAN MAKE CERTAIN OF THAT."

"DON'T FORGET SHIMEATH," MOTHER SAID. "HE CAN EAT ABOUT AS MUCH AS ANY OF YOU, MAYBE EVEN MORE." SHE LAUGHED.

BUT WHEN WE GATHERED AROUND THE TABLE, I WONDERED WHETHER WE COULD EAT AT ALL, WITH THE PROSPECT OF THE SEPARATION HANGING OVER US. IT WAS LATER THAN OUR USUAL HOUR FOR DINNER, AND I WAS HUNGRY, BUT STILL I WONDERED.

JEDIDAH WAS THE YOUNGEST, AND SHE KNEW HER MOTHER. "BUT, WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER NIGHTS?" SHE ASKED.

"BECAUSE THIS NIGHT WE REMEMBER HOW OUR FOREFATHERS LONG AGO WENT OUT OF EGYPT, FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM, BY THE POWER OF GOD," FATHER ANSWERED. AND HE WENT ON TO TELL MORE OF THAT GREAT DELIVERANCE. THEN HE ADDED, "AND NOW SOME OF US ARE GOING OUT AGAIN, TRUSTING IN THE POWER OF GOD TO KEEP US IN SAFETY — AND TO KEEP THOSE LEFT BEHIND IN SAFETY TOO." IT WAS NOT PART OF THE RITUAL, BUT WE WERE ALL IMPRESSED.

MY GRANDMOTHER WAS OLD, ALMOST TOOTHLESS, BUT SHE SPOKE OUT. "GAM KI YLEYK S'GEY TSALMAWETH," SHE QUOTED, "EVEN THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VERY SHADOW OF DEATH....." THAT WAS NOT PART OF THE RITUAL EITHER, BUT WE FELT THAT IT WAS APPROPRIATE. AND WE KNEW THAT FOR HER, DEATH COULD NOT BE FAR AWAY.

WE WENT THROUGH THE RITUAL, JOINING IN THE PRAYERS. IT WAS A SOLEMN EXPERIENCE FOR US ALL, AS WE THOUGHT OF THE IMPENDING SEPARATION AND THE DANGERS BEFORE US IN OUR UNCERTAIN FUTURE. BUT NOTWITHSTANDING OUR EMOTIONS WE DID EAT THE FOOD, NOT A MORSEL OF THE MEAT WENT UNCONSUMED. AND AT THE END WE SANG THE GREAT HILLEL, AND WENT QUIETLY TO REST.

AS I LAY, WAITING FOR SLEEP TO COME, I WONDERED WHAT THINGS WOULD BE LIKE AT THE NEXT PASSOVER, AND WHETHER WE WOULD EVER AGAIN BE ABLE TO AT THIS MEAL TOGETHER AS A FAMILY.

"WHERE IS YOUR GOD?"

AS SOON AS THE FESTIVITIES WERE OVER, PREPARATIONS FOR THE JOURNEY WERE BEGUN. THE EXPEDITION WAS SUPPOSED TO BE KEPT SECRET, LEST SOME ADVENTURER WOULD SEIZE THE TREASURE. BUT OF COURSE IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO KEEP SUCH AN AFFAIR COMPLETELY SECRET. JEREMIAH HAD LEARNED OF IT, AND SEIZED ON THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEND THE LETTER TO THE EXILES.

THE PURPOSE OF THE EXPEDITION WAS TWO-FOLD — THREE-FOLD IF YOU COUNT OUR PART IN IT. THE RAB-SHEKAH, NERGAL-APPLI-IDDINA, REPRESENTATIVE OF KING NEBUCHADREZZAR, WAS BEING TRANSFERRED TO ANOTHER POST. A DEPUTY WOULD TAKE HIS PLACE UNTIL THE OFFICIAL REPLACEMENT ARRIVED. THE ANNUAL TRIBUTE WAS BEING SENT, AND OF COURSE IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT IT BE WELL GUARDED. A UNIT OF THE AKKADIAN ARMY, 24 SOLDIERS WITH THREE OFFICERS, WAS DESIGNATED FOR THIS SERVICE, REINFORCED BY A SIMILAR UNIT OF THE ARMY OF JUDAH. DELAIAH AND JEHUDI WERE THE OFFICIAL CUSTODIANS OF THE TREASURE UNTIL IT SHOULD BE TURNED OVER TO THE KING'S TREASURY IN BABYLON. AND OUR GROUP WERE ALLOWED TO GO ALONG, AT OUR OWN EXPENSE. AFTER ALL, EACH EXTRA MAN ADDED SOMETHING TO THE SECURITY.

THE RAB-SHEKAH WOULD TRAVEL IN A CHARIOT. ANOTHER CHARIOT WAS PROVIDED FOR DELAIAH AND JEHUDI, ALSO TO CARRY THE CHEST OF TREASURE. BESIDES THE SOLDIERS THERE WERE DRIVERS AND ATTENDANTS. THE SOLDIERS WOULD GO ON FOOT, BUT THE OFFICERS WERE MOUNTED. WE WOULD WALK, BUT WE HAD SIX PACK ASSES TO CARRY FOOD AND CLOTHING, A TENT, FATHER'S TOOLS, AND THE BOOKS. I COUNTED 7 PERSONS, 12 HORSES AND 24 PACK ANIMALS. SO LARGE AND WELL ARMED A COMPANY SHOULD BE SAFE FROM ATTACK BY BEDOUINS ALONG THE WAY.

IT WOULD BE A LONG JOURNEY. EXPERIENCED TRAVELERS ESTIMATED THAT WE MIGHT TAKE FOUR MONTHS TO REACH BABEL. BESIDES THE HUMAN FACTOR, TIME HAD TO BE ALLOWED FOR THE ANIMALS TO GRAZE. IT WAS SPRING, NEW GRASS WAS SPRINGING EVERYWHERE, AND THAT WAS TO OUR ADVANTAGE.

OUR FAREWELLS WERE SAID AMID MANY TEARS, AND WE JOINED THE CARAVEN. SO MANY LAST MINUTE DETAILS HAD TO BE ATTENDED TO THAT IT WAS ALMOST MIDDAY BY THE TIME WE GOT STARTED. WHEN IT CAME TIME TO MAKE CAMP IN THE EVENING WE WERE BARELY OUT OF SIGHT OF JERUSALEM.

IT HAD BEEN DECIDED TO HAVE TAMAR AND JERUSHA DRESS LIKE BOYS, HOPING THUS TO AVOID ANY UNWELCOME ATTENTIONS FROM THE SOLDIERS. THE SOLDIERS MAY HAVE SUSPECTED THAT THEY WERE GIRLS, BUT NOTHING WAS SAID ABOUT IT, OR DONE -- AT LEAST NOT FOR A LONG TIME.

HANANI WAS ABOUT SIX MONTHS OLDER THAN I, AND A GOOD DEAL LARGER AND MORE MATURE. THE YEAR BEFORE, HE HAD SPENT SEVERAL MONTHS WITH AN UNCLE AT EZION-GEBER. WHILE THERE HE HAD HAD SOME CONTACT WITH BEDOUINS, AND HAD LEARNED SOMETHING OF THEIR CUSTOMS AND LANGUAGE. HE WAS ALWAYS TALKING ABOUT THE BEDOU, AS HE CALLED THEM. HANANI CARRIED A BOW AND ARROWS. HE HOPED THAT HE MIGHT GET A CHANCE AT SOME GAME ALONG THE WAY, AND THEY MIGHT ALSO BE USEFUL FOR DEFENSE IN CASE WE WERE ATTACKED. EACH OF US CARRIED A SHEATH KNIFE, USEFUL FOR CUTTING FOOD, AND OTHER THINGS. AND WE EACH CARRIED A STAFF -- SNAKES MIGHT BE ENCOUNTERED ANYWHERE.

WE SOON SETTLED INTO A REGULAR ROUTINE. IN THE EVENINGS WE SET UP THE TENT, BUT IF THE WEATHER WAS FAIR HANANI AND I GENERALLY SLEPT UNDER THE OPEN SKY. BUT SEVERAL TIMES WE HAD RAIN, AND ONCE SOME VISIOUS HAIL, AND WE WERE GLAD TO CREEP INTO THE TENT. IT WAS VERY CROWDED, SIX OF US IN A SMALL TENT, BUT ANY PROTECTION WAS GOOD TO HAVE, ESPECIALLY FROM THE HAIL.

WE CROSSED THE JORDAN NEAR BETH-SHAN, THEN OUR ROAD FOLLOWED THE COURSE OF THE YARMUK, WHICH COMES DOWN FROM THE PLATEAU IN A SERIES OF WATERFALLS. THE RIVER WAS HIGH FROM RECENT RAINS, AND THE ROAR OF THE FALLS WAS OFTEN HEARD. I HEARD MY FATHER SAY:

"MY SOUL IS CAST DOWN WITHIN ME, THEREFORE I REMEMBER THEE

FROM THE LAND OF JORDAN AND OF HERMON, FROM MOUNT MIZAR.

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP AT THE THUNDER OF THY CATARACTS;

ALL THY BILLOWS AND THY WAVES HAVE GONE OVER ME."

DAY AFTER DAY WE COULD SEE MOUNT HERMON IN THE DISTANCE, ITS SNOW CLAD SUMMIT GLEAMING IN THE SUNLIGHT.

THE AKKADIANS IN OUR PARTY SEEMED TO BE VERY RELIGIOUS, AFTER THEIR FASHION. IN THEIR BAGGAGE THEY ALL CARRIED IMAGES OF THEIR GODS, IMAGES OF WOOD, MOSTLY, BUT SOME OF STONE, OR METAL. EACH EVENING, AS WE MADE CAMP, THEY WOULD TAKE OUT THESE IMAGES AND SET THEM ON LITTLE STANDS, BUILD A LITTLE FIRE BEFORE THEM, AND BURN A PINCH OF INCENSE. WE LEARNED THE NAMES OF SOME OF THEM -- BEL, NABU, MARDUK, NERGAL, ISHTAR, AND OTHERS.

"WHERE IS YOUR GOD," THEY WOULD SAY, AND LAUGH AS THEY SAID IT. "THESE ARE OUR GODS, THEY BRING US VICTORY AND SUCCESS. WHERE IS YOUR GOD?"

IN THE BITTERNESS OF DEFEAT THERE WAS NOTHING WE COULD ANSWER THEM.

BUT AT NIGHT FATHER OFTEN WEPT. I HEARD HIM SAY:

"MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR GOD, FOR THE LIVING GOD.

WHEN SHALL I COME AND BEHOLD THE FACE OF GOD?

MY TEARS HAVE BEEN MY FOOD DAY AND NIGHT,

WHILE MEN SAY TO ME CONTINUALLY, 'WHERE IS YOUR GOD?'

IT WAS A BITTER DOSE FOR HIM. BUT LATER I HEARD HIM SAY:

"WHY ARE YOU CAST DOWN, O MY SOUL?

AND WHY ARE YOU DISQUIETED WITHIN ME?

HOPE IN GOD; FOR I SHALL AGAIN PRAISE HIM.

MY HELP AND MY GOD."

WE REACHED DAMASCUS, AND STAYED THERE THREE DAYS. IT GAVE US A CHANCE TO REST AND RENEW OUR STOCK OF PROVISIONS, AND GET SOME CLOTHES WASHED. APRICOTS AND FIGS WERE JUST COMING IN, AND AFTER OUR DRIED PROVISIONS IT WAS A DELIGHT TO EAT FRESH FRUIT. HANANI AND I, AND THE GIRLS, WANDERED THROUGH THE BAZAARS OF THAT ANCIENT CITY, AND MARVELED AT ALL THE WARES DISPLAYED. BUT WE WERE IN NO POSITION TO DO ANY SHOPPING, HAVING NEITHER MONEY NOR SPACE IN THE BAGGAGE TO PUT ANYTHING. FATHER DID BUY A FEW THINGS THAT HE NEEDED FOR HIS CRAFT, BUT THAT WAS ALL. STILL, IT WAS INTERESTING TO SEE THE PLACE.

IN OUR COUNTRY WE HAD ALWAYS SPOKEN OF BABEL AS BEING TO THE NORTH OF US. OUR JOURNEY THUS FAR HAD BEEN MOSTLY NORTHWARD; BUT NOW WE TURNED EASTWARD, TO CROSS THE DESERT. IT WAS STILL GREEN IN EARLY SUMMER, BUT WAS RAPIDLY BECOMING BROWN AND SERE UNDER THE MIDSUMMER SUN. THERE WERE A FEW WELLS BESIDE THAT LONG ROAD, AND SOME POOLS REMAINING AFTER THE SPRING RAINS. WE MET A FEW TRAVELERS, MOSTLY ON CAMELS. THE HEAT BECAME MORE OPPRESSIVE EACH DAY, AND THE DUST RAISED BY SO MANY ANIMALS WAS APPALLING. WE DROPPED AS FAR TO THE REAR AS WE DARED, NOT WANTING TO LOSE CONTACT WITH THE CARAVAN. THAT HELPED SOME WITH THE DUST PROBLEM, BUT WHEN WE CAME TO A WATER HOLE WE FOUND THAT WITH SO MANY THERE BEFORE US THE WATER WAS ALL CHURNED INTO MUD, ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR OUR ANIMALS TO DRINK.

ONE DAY, WHEN WE FELT THAT SURELY THE WAY COULD NOT BE MUCH LONGER WE SAW A TROOP OF BEDOUINS, MOUNTED ON CAMELS, ON A HILL TOP AT A DISTANCE, LOOKING AT US. THERE APPEARED TO BE ABOUT TWENTY MEN IN THE GROUP. WE WERE FAR ENOUGH BEHIND THE CARAVAN THAT IT GAVE US SOME CONCERN, BUT THEY MADE NO MOVE TO ATTACK US. PERHAPS THEY DECIDED THAT WE WERE NOT WORTH PLUNDERING.

THE FOLLOWING DAY WE CAME TO WHAT PROVED TO BE THE LAST WATER HOLE, AND FOUND IT COMPLETELY DRY. OUR ANIMALS SUFFERED ACUTELY. BUT THE NEXT AFTERNOON WE TOPPED A RISE AND SAW IN THE DISTANCE A LINE OF TREES. WITH WATER GLEAMING THROUGH THEM. IT WAS THE RIVER! THE MIGHTY EUPHRATES! OUR ANIMALS, FRANTIC FOR WATER, BROKE INTO A RUN, AND IT TOOK US AN HOUR OR MORE TO COME UP WITH THEM, AND MAKE OUR CAMP.

WE HAD MADE IT! THE DIFFICULT PART WAS PAST, FROM HERE ON WE WOULD BE NEAR THE RIVER, WITH WATER PLENTIFUL, ENTERING A LAND OF IRRIGATED FIELDS, BECOMING INCREASINGLY POPULOUS AS WE WENT, WITH VILLAGES AND TOWNS, EVEN MANY CITIES, WHERE SUPPLIES COULD BE PURCHASED. WE REJOICED THAT EVENING AT HAVING COMPLETED THE SECOND STAGE OF OUR JOURNEY. OUR HOPES SOARED.

WE MADE OUR CAMP AT A LITTLE DISTANCE FROM THE MAIN CAMP. HANANI AND I COULD HARDLY WAIT TILL WE HAD PUT UP THE TENT AND FED THE ANIMALS TO GO FOR A SWIM IN THE RIVER. WE ALL HAD SOME KNOWLEDGE OF SWIMMING, WHICH WE HAD PRACTICED AT A POOL IN JERUSALEM, AND ON OCCASIONAL EXCURSIONS TO THE SEASHORE. WE FELT GREATLY REFRESHED AFTER OUR SWIM, AND AFTERWARD FATHER AND ELASA WENT FOR A SWIM ALSO.

AFTER SUPPER THE GIRLS WANTED TO GO TO THE RIVER. FATHER HESITATED, BUT THEY BEGGED, AND HE FINALLY CONSENTED, ON CONDITION THAT HANANI AND I SHOULD STAND WATCH AT A SAFE DISTANCE, TO MAKE SURE NOTHING HAPPENED.

THE GIRLS UNDRESSED BEHIND SOME BUSHES, AND WE COULD HEAR THEM SPLASHING IN THE WATER. THE MOON WAS FIVE DAYS OLD, AND GAVE A LITTLE LIGHT. AND SOMEBODY ELSE WAS WATCHING. TWO OF THE AKKADIAN SOLDIERS MUST HAVE CONCLUDED THAT THESE "BOYS" WERE REALLY GIRLS, AND HAD HIDDEN THEMSELVES NEARBY, WATCHING FOR SUCH A CHANCE. JUST AS THE GIRLS WERE LEAVING THE WATER THEY RUSHED IN, ONE SEIZED JERUSHA, COVERING HER MOUTH WITH HIS HAND TO STIFLE HER SCREAMS, WHILE THE OTHER WENT FOR TAMAR, WHO DIVED INTO THE WATER TO ESCAPE HIM. I FELLED HIM WITH A BLOW OF MY STAFF, WHILE HANANI WENT TO THE RESCUE OF JERUSHA.

"QUICK, TAMAR!" I CRIED. "GET YOUR CLOTHES AND GET BACK TO THE CAMP. THIS MAN WON'T BOTHER YOU FOR A WHILE."

SHE CAME OUT OF THE WATER, GRABBED HER CLOTHES, AND WENT STREAKING FOR THE TENT. I LOOKED AT THE SOLDIER, WHO LAY WHERE HE HAD FALLEN. I HOPED I HAD NOT KILLED HIM, BUT RAN TO SEE WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HANANI AND JERUSHA. JERUSHA WAS RUNNING TOWARD THE TENT, HANANI WAS STANDING OVER THE SOLDIER, WIPING HIS KNIFE ON SOME DRY GRASS. ONE LOOK CONVINCED ME THAT THE SOLDIER WAS DEAD.

"WELL, HE'S DONE FOR," I SAID. "LET'S SEE ABOUT THE OTHER ONE." I FELT HIS PULSE, FOUND IT PRETTY STRONG. "I THINK HE'LL MAKE IT," I SAID. "BUT I'M AFRAID WE'LL BE IN REAL TROUBLE ABOUT THE DEAD ONE."

HANANI HAD BEEN DOING SOME QUICK THINKING. "I'LL HAVE TO TAKE THE BLAME FOR IT," HE SAID, "AND THE ONLY CHANCE IS TO GET AWAY, AS QUICKLY AS I CAN. THEN MAYBE THEY WON'T PUNISH THE REST OF YOU FOR THIS."

"WHERE CAN YOU GO?"
"TO THE BEDUW," HE SAID. "I'VE HAD ENOUGH DEALINGS WITH THEIR KIND THAT I FEEL SURE I CAN JOIN THEIR BAND AND BE ACCEPTED."
"HOW CAN YOU FIND THEM?"

"I CAN GO BACK TO WHERE WE SAW THEM, AND FOLLOW THEIR TRACKS. THEY ARE PROBABLY CAMPING NOT FAR AWAY. I'LL FIND THEM."

"WHAT ABOUT THE DEAD MAN?" I ASKED. "SHALL WE JUST LEAVE HIM HERE?"

"LET'S THROW HIM IN THE RIVER," HANANI SAID. "THE CROCODILES WILL FINISH HIM OFF, OR IF HE EVER COMES UP WE'LL BE LONG GONE."

SO WE DID THAT. THE OTHER SOLDIER WAS BEGINNING TO STIR. WE LEFT HIM, SURE THAT HE WOULD FIND HIS WAY BACK TO HIS OWN CAMP. THERE MIGHT BE A BIG ROW ABOUT IT IN THE MORNING, WE WOULD HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE. I RETRIEVED JERUSHA'S CLOTHES AND WE WENT TO THE TENT.

THE GIRLS HAD TOLD OUR STORY, OR AS MUCH AS THEY KNEW. HANANI TOLD THE REST, AND ANNOUNCED HIS PLAN TO GO AWAY.

"SO PERISH ALL THINE ENEMIES, O YAHWEH," ELASA SAID. "THAT WAS WELL DONE, MY SON, AND YOU ARE DOING RIGHT TO GO AWAY. IF YOU STAY IT WILL BE DEATH TO YOU, PERHAPS TO ALL OF US."

"TAKE ONE OF THE ASSES," FATHER SAID. "WE'LL PACK A BUNDLE OF FOOD AND CLOTHING, AND YOU HAD BETTER GO AS SOON AS YOU CAN. THE MOON WILL GIVE YOU LIGHT FOR ANOTHER HOUR OR SO."

HANANI EMBRACED MY FATHER AND HIS FATHER, HIS SISTER JERUSHA, AND THEN ME. IT WAS A SAD LEAVE TAKING FOR ME. HE HAD BEEN LIKE A BROTHER. LAST OF ALL HE EMBRACED MY SISTER TAMAR. SHE WAS ONLY TWELVE, BUT I HAD ALREADY THOUGHT THERE WAS SOMETHING BETWEEN THEM, AND NOW I WAS SURE. HE HELD HER CLOSE, AND WHISPERED IN HER EAR. SHE KISSED HIM AND SAID ALOUD, "I PROMISE."

THEN HANANI MOUNTED THE DONKEY AND SET OUT, RIDING TOWARD THE SETTING MOON. I WENT TO LOOK AT THE STUNNED SOLDIER, AND HE WAS GONE. I RAKED DIRT OVER THE BLOOD STAINS, AND WE ALL WENT TO REST, WONDERING WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO US IN THE MORNING.

THE LAND OF SHINAR

THE NEXT MORNING, AS WE WERE ALL BREAKING CAMP, I WANDERED DOWN TO WHERE THE SOLDIERS WERE ENCAMPED, WATCHING FOR ANY SIGN OF UNUSUAL ACTIVITY. I OVERHEARD ENOUGH OF THEIR TALK TO KNOW THAT ONE OF THEIR NUMBER WAS MISSING.

"ONE OF OUR DONKEYS IS MISSING, TOO," I SAID. MAYBE THERE IS SOME CONNECTION. "ALONG THE WAY I HAD PICKED UP ENOUGH OF THEIR AKKADIAN TONGUE THAT I COULD COMMUNICATE, BUT I FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW THEIR RAPID SPEECH, ESPECIALLY WHEN SEVERAL WERE TALKING AT ONCE. BUT I GATHERED THAT THEY WERE NOT GREATLY SURPRISED THAT A SOLDIER SHOULD DESERT, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE RIVER HAD BEEN REACHED."

I COUNTED THE SOLDIERS. THERE WAS ONLY ONE MISSING. THEY WERE WEARING TURBANS. ONE OF THEM MUST HAVE HAD A SIZEABLE LUMP ON HIS HEAD, BUT IT WAS NOT VISIBLE. I REJOINED OUR GROUP AND REPORTED WHAT I HAD SEEN.

"I'VE KNOWN OF CASES," ELASA SAID, WHEN A MAN SUFFERED A CONCUSSION AND AFTERWARD HAD NO RECOLLECTION OF EVENTS JUST BEFORE THE BLOW. IT MAY HAVE HAPPENED THAT WAY WITH YOUR FRIEND."

"NO FRIEND OF MINE," I SAID. "BUT IF HE HAS FORGOTTEN IT, SO MUCH THE BETTER."

AND IT MUST HAVE BEEN SO, FOR NOBODY CAME TO QUESTION US ABOUT THE MISSING SOLDIER. AND STRANGELY ENOUGH, NOBODY SEEMED TO NOTICE THAT HANANI WAS NO LONGER IN OUR PARTY. IF WE COULD ONLY HAVE KNOWN HOW IT WOULD TURN OUT, HE NEED NOT HAVE GONE. BUT HE WAS GONE, AND HIS GOING HAD IMPORTANT CONSEQUENCES FOR US — FOR US, AND FOR MANY OTHERS IN YEARS TO COME.

WE RESUMED OUR MARCH, PLODDING ALONG THROUGH THE HEAT. SUMMER WAS WELL ADVANCED, AND THE HEAT WAS TERRIFIC. WE WERE STILL FAR FROM OUR OBJECTIVE, BUT BEING CLOSE TO THE RIVER MADE A LOT OF DIFFERENCE. SOON WE BEGAN TO SEE CULTIVATED FIELDS — OF GRAIN, AND VEGETABLE GARDENS. I COULD SEE THAT THE SOIL WAS AMAZINGLY FERTILE. THE WHEAT STOOD THICK AND TALL, HEADS HEAVY WITH GRAIN. HARVEST HAD BEGUN, AND SOME FIELDS WERE ALREADY PLOWED FOR A SECOND SEEDING. I HAD HEARD THAT WITH IRRIGATION TWO CROPS A YEAR MIGHT BE MADE IN THAT LAND.

THERE WAS A REGULAR ROUTE FOLLOWING THE COURSE OF THE RIVER. WE CROSSED MANY IRRIGATION CANALS, AND WENT OVER THE LARGER ONES. WE PASSED MANY TOWNS AND VILLAGES, AND SOME QUITE LARGE CITIES. EVERYWHERE WERE SIGNS OF THE UTMOST PROSPERITY — MANY FINE HOUSES, AND EVEN THE FARM LABORERS SEEMED TO HAVE COMFORTABLE DWELLINGS.

AT LAST, LATE IN THE AFTERNOON OF A DAY IN LATE SUMMER, ONE OF THE OFFICERS OF THE AKKADIAN SOLDIERY, WHO SEEMED TO HAVE TAKEN A LIKING FOR ME CALLED TO ME AND POINTED. FAR IN THE DISTANCE I COULD SEE THE FAINT OUTLINES OF BUILDINGS, AMONG THEM A HIGH TOWER, WHICH I LEARNED WAS CALLED THE ZIGGURAT. "BAB-ILU," THE OFFICER SAID PROUDLY.

I HAD GONE A LITTLE AHEAD OF OUR GROUP. I WAITED FOR THEM TO COME UP, AND POINTED OUT THE VIEW TO THEM. IT WAS A THRILLING MOMENT. "THERE IS THE GREAT CITY," I SAID. "WE ARE ABOUT TO GET THERE AT LAST."

IT WAS STILL TWO DAYS BEFORE WE REACHED EVEN THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE CITY. WE CAME AT LAST TO A CARAVANSARY WHERE WE WERE ABLE TO OBTAIN LODGINGS. WE WERE QUITE WILLING THEN TO BE SEPARATED FROM THE OFFICIAL CAVALCADE. WE WERE NO LONGER DEPENDENT ON THEM; IN FACT, THEY HAD NOT EVEN BEEN VERY FRIENDLY ON THE WAY. ALTHOUGH MY FATHER AND ELASA WERE MEN OF SOME DISTINCTION, THE KING'S LEGATES TREATED THEM VERY COOLLY. AND NATURALLY, WE YOUNG PEOPLE WERE NOT SHOWN THE LEAST CONSIDERATION. WE WERE ALL GLAD TO BE SEPARATED FROM THEM.

AFTER A NIGHT OF REST IT WAS DECIDED TO LEAVE ELASA AND THE GIRLS AT THE CARAVANSARY, WHILE FATHER AND I WENT INTO THE CITY IN SEARCH OF INFORMATION AS TO THE WHEREABOUTS OF OUR PEOPLE. ELASA SAID HE WOULD BE GLAD TO REST FOR A DAY OR TWO.

FATHER AND I PUT ON OUR BEST CLOTHES, AND LEAVING INSTRUCTIONS FOR OUR TRAVEL STAINED GARMENTS TO BE WASHED, WE SET OUT TO EXPLORE THE GREAT CITY. IT TOOK SEVERAL HOURS OF WALKING TO REACH THE CENTER OF THE CITY. WE WERE AMAZED AT THE MAGNIFICENT BUILDINGS, MUCH FINER THAN ANY WE HAD IN JERUSALEM.

"THERE MUST BE A STREET WHERE THE JEWELERS AND GOLDSMITHS HAVE THEIR SHOPS," FATHER SAID. "IF WE CAN FIND THAT IT WILL BE A GOOD PLACE TO ASK FOR INFORMATION. AND IF MY BROTHER IS STILL LIVING, WE MIGHT FIND HIM."

I BEGAN MAKING INQUIRIES IN MY LIMITED AKKADIAN — FATHER SCARCELY KNEW A WORD OF THE LANGUAGE YET — AND PEOPLE SEEMED WILLING ENOUGH TO TELL US, BUT THEIR DIRECTIONS MEANT VERY LITTLE TO US, NAMES OF STREETS WE HAD NEVER HEARD OF, AND SUCH. IT WAS VERY CONFUSING. BUT AT LAST I FOUND A MAN WHO SPOKE ARAMAIC, AND FOLLOWING HIS DIRECTIONS WE DID FIND THE STREET WE WERE LOOKING FOR. AND BEFORE WE HAD GONE VERY FAR ALONG IT WE RAN RIGHT INTO UNCLE AZARIAH, STANDING IN FRONT OF HIS SHOP. WHAT A HAPPY REUNION! HE TOOK US INTO HIS SHOP, AND LED US TO HIS LIVING QUARTERS IN THE REAR. THERE WE MET MY AUNT HANNAH, AND MY COUSIN MULCAH, A LITTLE YOUNGER THAN I. THEY WERE HAPPY INDEED TO SEE US. THERE WAS A LOT OF HUGGING AND KISSING.

"AND THIS IS JO-ZADAK!" UNCLE AZARIAH SAID. "HE IS GETTING TO BE QUITE A YOUNG MAN. HE WAS JUST A KID WHEN I SAW HIM LAST."

FATHER ASKED ABOUT OUR PEOPLE.

"THEY ARE SCATTERED ALL OVER," UNCLE AZARIAH SAID. "THE HIGHLY SKILLED WORKMEN QUICKLY FOUND EMPLOYMENT IN CALNEH, AND URUK, AND OTHER CITIES. BUT THE BULK OF THOSE THAT CAME TWO YEARS AGO, WHEN WE DID, ARE IN A NEW SETTLEMENT, AT CHEBAR."

"WHERE IS THAT?" I ASKED.

"IT IS SOUTHEAST OF HERE, ABOUT THREE DAYS JOURNEY. CHEBAR IS A RIVER, A TRIBUTARY OF THE EUPHRATES. THEY HAVE BUILT A DAM, AND HAVE OPENED UP A WHOLE NEW SET OF IRRIGATION CANALS. MOST OF OUR PEOPLE ARE FARMING. CHEBAR IS THE NAME THEY GAVE TO THE NEW TOWN THAT IS GROWING UP THERE."

"I'M GLAD THEY CAN BE TOGETHER," FATHER SAID. "I'M AFRAID OUR PEOPLE, IF THEY ARE SCATTERED ALL OVER, WILL LOSE SIGHT OF THE FACT THAT, WHEREVER THEY ARE, THEY ARE STILL GOD'S PEOPLE. I'D HATE FOR THAT TO HAPPEN."

UNCLE AZARIAH AGREED. "IT WAS REALLY DANIEL'S IDEA," HE SAID. "DO YOU REMEMBER DANIEL?"

"YES, I SURE DO. IT'S BEEN ELEVEN OR TWELVE YEARS SINCE THAT FIRST GROUP OF EXILES WERE BROUGHT OVER HERE. DANIEL WAS ABOUT JO-ZADAK'S AGE THEN, AS I RECALL. HE WAS A SON OF JOSIAH BY THAT CONCUBINE FROM SIDON, I FORGET HER NAME."

"THAT'S RIGHT. AND THERE WERE THREE OTHERS, ALL RELATED TO THE ROYAL FAMILY. NEBUCHADREZZAR PUT ALL FOUR OF THEM IN THE UNIVERSITY, AND THEY HAVE ALL DONE WELL, ESPECIALLY DANIEL. HE HAS A HIGH POSITION NOW, AS ASSISTANT TO THE MINISTER OF STATE, UR AZAG-NUN-NA. SO WHEN HE KNEW THAT ALL THESE THOUSANDS WERE BEING BROUGHT OVER HERE HE PROPOSED THAT THIS NEW SETTLEMENT BE SET UP FOR THEM. HE SAID THAT THEY WOULD BE HAPPIER THAT WAY, AND THE KING WENT ALONG WITH HIS PLAN."

"AND ARE THEY HAPPY?"

"THEY'RE WORKING PRETTY WELL, AND MAKING A GOOD LIVING. BUT HAPPY? NO, YOU NEVER SAW SUCH AN UNHAPPY BUNCH OF PEOPLE, ALL CRYING TO GO HOME. THIS IS HOME, I TELL THEM. OUR EXILE IS JUST ONE OF THE FACTS OF LIFE THAT YOU HAVE GOT TO ACCEPT. BUT THEY WON'T LISTEN. I WAS OUT THERE ABOUT A MONTH AGO, AND ALL THAT I COULD HEAR WAS, 'WE WANT TO GO HOME.'"

FATHER TOLD HIM ABOUT JEREMIAH'S LETTER, AND GAVE IT TO HIM TO READ. HE READ IT THROUGH, THOUGHTFULLY.

"JEREMIAH THINKS THIS EXILE MAY BE GOD'S WAY OF PRESERVING THE NATION," FATHER SAID. "HE FORESEES THAT ZEDEKIAH AND HIS CREW ARE GOING TO KEEP ON PLOTTING WITH EGYPT TILL NEBUCHADREZZAR LOSES PATIENCE AND DESTROYS THE WHOLE THING COMPLETELY."

"AND PROBABLY RIGHT, AT THAT," UNCLE AZARIAH AGREED.

"ANYWAY I'LL HAVE TO GO OUT THERE AND TAKE THIS LETTER," FATHER SAID.

"AND THE BOOKS." HE TOLD ABOUT THE BOOKS, AND ABOUT ELASA, AND THE GIRLS.

"BRING THEM ALL HERE TOMORROW," AUNT HANNAH SAID. "WE'LL HAVE ROOM FOR THEM UNTIL YOU CAN GET YOURSELVES SETTLED."

"THERE'LL BE TIME ENOUGH FOR YOU TO GO TO CHEBAR," UNCLE SAID. "YOU CAN STAY HERE A FEW DAYS, ANYWAY, TO SEE SOMETHING OF THE CITY. AND I WANT TO GET AN APPOINTMENT FOR YOU TO SEE DANIEL — MAYBE DAY AFTER TOMORROW. HE WILL BE GLAD TO SEE YOU, AND TO HEAR NEWS FROM JERUSALEM. AND I WOULDN'T DOUBT HE MAY HAVE SOME USEFUL SUGGESTIONS TO MAKE ABOUT FUTURE PLANS."

AUNT HANNAH INSISTED ON GIVING US AN EARLY SUPPER, AND WE HURRIED BACK TO THE CARAVANSARY. WE HAD QUITE A STORY TO TELL.

THE NEXT DAY WE ALL MOVED IN WITH UNCLE AZARIAH AND AUNT HANNAH. THEIR HOUSE WAS NOT LARGE, AND IT MADE THINGS CROWDED. WE WOULD NOT STAY INDEFINITELY, BUT IT WAS MUCH BETTER THAN THE CARAVANSARY. IN ADDITION TO MY COUSIN MULCAH THEY HAD TWIN BOYS, ELEVEN YEARS OLD, DAVID AND JONATHAN. THEY HAD ONLY ONE GUEST ROOM; FATHER AND ELASA SLEPT THERE. I MOVED IN WITH THE TWINS, AND THE TWO GIRLS DOUBLED UP WITH MULCAH. THEY HAD A SLAVE GIRL, VERY BLACK; SHE SLEPT ON A PALLET IN THE KITCHEN.

WE STAYED UP PRETTY LATE THAT NIGHT, TALKING, TALKING, TALKING..... WE HAD TO CATCH UP ON ALL THE NEWS OF THE FAMILY AND OF RECENT EVENTS, IN JERUSALEM AND IN BABEL. WE HAD TO TELL ABOUT OUR JOURNEY, AND THEY HAD STORIES TO TELL ABOUT THEIRS, TWO YEARS BEFORE. OUR JOURNEY HAD BEEN SWIFT AND EASY COMPARED WITH THE MIGRATION OF THOUSANDS, CARRYING WHAT FEW BELONGINGS THEY COULD, MANY WITH SMALL CHILDREN. MORE THAN A HUNDRED BABIES WERE BORN ON THE WAY, AND 37 LOVELY GRAVES WERE LEFT BY THE WAY-SIDE. IT WAS A WONDER THAT SO MANY HAD SURVIVED THE ORDEAL.

"WHAT ABOUT THE GUARDS?" ELASA ASKED, REMEMBERING OUR EXPERIENCE.

"THERE WERE SOME INSTANCES OF CRUELTY," AUNT HANNAH REPLIED, "BUT NOT NEARLY SO MANY AS I FEARED THERE MIGHT BE. THE OFFICERS HAD ORDERS TO KEEP THE MEN IN ORDER, BUT SOMETIMES THEY GOT OUT OF LINE."

"ONE SOLDIER WHO HAD BEEN PARTICULARLY OFFENSIVE WAS FOUND ONE MORNING WITH HIS THROAT CUT," UNCLE AZARIAH ADDED. "THEY RETALIATED BY EXECUTING THREE OF OUR MEN, BUT THEY HAD GOT THE MESSAGE. THINGS WENT A LITTLE BETTER AFTER THAT."

I TOLD THEM ABOUT HANANI AND THE SLAIN SOLDIER. WHEN WE SAID OUR PRAYERS WE ASKED YAHWEH TO KEEP HANANI IN SAFETY.

UNCLE AZARIAH HAD ARRANGED FOR US TO VISIT DANIEL THE FOLLOWING DAY. — FATHER AND ELASA AND I, AND UNCLE AZARIAH WENT WITH US — THE GIRLS STAYED AT THE HOUSE. WE WALKED ALONG THE BRICK PAVED STREETS, PAST THE MAGNIFICENT PALACES AND TEMPLES, UNCLE AZARIAH POINTING OUT THE SIGHTS TO US AS WE WENT. THERE WERE MANY IDOLS, WHICH WERE OFFENSIVE TO US, BUT SOME OF THE TEMPLES WERE REALLY IMPRESSIVE. WE CAME AT LAST TO A VERY IMPOSING BUILDING, WHICH HOUSED MANY OFFICES OF THE GOVERNMENT. WE WENT UP BROAD STEPS INTO A HALL LINED WITH MARBLE SLABS CARVED WITH FIGURES OF BATTLE SCENES AND LION HUNTS, AND COLUMNS OF WRITING IN THEIR CURIOUS CHARACTERS MADE UP OF LITTLE WEDGE SHAPED MARKS. IT MUST HAVE TAKEN A LOT OF WORK TO CARVE THEM ALL.

WE COULD TELL BY THE SORT OF OFFICE HE HAD THAT DANIEL WAS A VERY IMPORTANT MAN INDEED. THERE WERE A NUMBER OF MEN WORKING AT TABLES, WRITING ON SLABS OF SOFT CLAY. IT WAS AMAZING HOW RAPIDLY THEY COULD WRITE THOSE COMPLICATED CHARACTERS. DANIEL HAD HIS PRIVATE OFFICE IN A SMALLER ROOM OPENING OFF THE LARGER ROOM — AND NOT SO SMALL, AT THAT. HE WAS SEATED AT A DESK, BUT STOOD UP AS WE APPROACHED. HE GREETED US WARMLY AS INTRODUCTIONS WERE MADE.

"IT IS GOOD TO HAVE A CHANCE TO SPEAK HEBREW," HE SAID. AND WE IN OUR TURN WERE GLAD TO HEAR IT. I WAS PROUD OF THE PROGRESS I HAD MADE ALREADY IN AKKADIAN, BUT STILL IT WAS A LABORIOUS THING TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS SAID, AND TO EXPRESS MY THOUGHT IN THEIR LANGUAGE.

THERE WAS AN OPEN WINDOW. SOMETIMES THERE WAS A FAN MOVING, NO DOUBT WORKED BY A SLAVE OR SLAVES, SO THAT A FRESH WIND OF AIR CAME THROUGH, AND IN SPITE OF THE DAY'S HEAT THE PLACE WAS VERY COMFORTABLE. DANIEL MOTIONED US TO SEAT, AND WE CONVERSED FREELY.

WHILE WE WERE TALKING A CLERK CAME TO THE DOOR, ASKED PERMISSION TO ENTER, AND LAID A CLAY SLAB ON A BOARD ON THE DESK. IT WAS COVERED WITH WRITING. DANIEL READ IT OVER QUICKLY, THEN TOOK A SEAL FROM A DRAWER OF THE DESK, AND ROLLED IT OVER THE SOFT CLAY. THE SEAL WAS IN A CYLINDER SHAPE, ENGRAVED WITH TINY CHARACTERS OF THE WEDGE SHAPED WRITING. THE TINY SIGNS STOOD OUT CLEARLY OVER THE LARGER WRITTEN CHARACTERS. THE CLERK TOOK THE SEALED TABLET AND WITHDREW.

I WANTED TO ASK ABOUT IT, BUT HESITATED. DANIEL SAW THE LOOK ON MY FACE. "YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?" HE SAID. "THAT DOCUMENT WILL BE TAKEN TO THE KILN AND LEFT OVERNIGHT. AFTER IT IS TAKEN OUT AND ALLOWED TO COOL IT WILL BE PLACED IN A FILING CABINET."

FATHER ASKED TO SEE THE SEAL. IT WAS ABOUT THE SIZE OF MY LITTLE FINGER, OF POLISHED AGATE, WITH THE SIGNS ENGRAVED IN REVERSE, SO THAT WHEN APPLIED TO THE CLAY THEY STOOD OUT, CLEARLY LEGIBLE.

"THAT'S BEAUTIFUL ENGRAVING," FATHER SAID.

"YES, IT IS," DANIEL REPLIED. "THAT'S YOUR LINE OF WORK, ISN'T IT?" HE READ THE CHARACTERS FOR US: "NABUIM KUCURRI USUR, GREAT KING, KING OF SUMER AND AKKAD, RULER OF THE FOUR REGIONS, BELTESHAZZAR, HIS SERVANT."

"SO THAT'S THE WAY THE KING'S NAME IS WRITTEN," I SAID. "IN OUR COUNTRY SOME PEOPLE SAY NESUCHADNEZZAR, AND SOME SAY NESUCHADREZZAR. I GUESS THE R IS NEARER RIGHT."

"YES," DANIEL ANSWERED. "AND BELTESHAZZAR IS MY NAME IN THIS COUNTRY."

"WE'LL HAVE TO GET USED TO THAT," ELASA SAID.

"I KNOW MANY OF OUR PEOPLE HATE TO HEAR THE KING'S NAME MENTIONED," DANIEL WENT ON. "BUT REALLY HE IS A GREAT KING, AND HAS BUILT UP A MARVELOUS ORGANIZATION. AND I THINK HE HAS BEEN REMARKABLY CONSIDERATE OF OUR PEOPLE — MORE SO THAN TO SOME OTHER CONQUERED PEOPLES, I KNOW. I HOPE OUR PEOPLE CAN GET RECONCILED TO LIVING IN THEIR COUNTRY. IT REALLY IS A NICE PLACE TO LIVE. OF COURSE I'VE LIVED HERE SO LONG I FEEL THAT IT IS REALLY MY COUNTRY. AND ANYWAY, THEY ARE HERE, AND HERE THEY WILL HAVE TO REMAIN, FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE."

FATHER TOLD HIM OF OUR MISSION, AND GAVE HIM JEREMIAH'S LETTER TO READ. DANIEL READ IT THROUGH, THEN WENT OVER IT AGAIN.

"THAT'S GOOD," HE SAID. "I ALWAYS ADMIRER JEREMIAH, THOUGH I WAS JUST A LAD WHEN I CAME HERE — ABOUT YOUR AGE," HE ADDED, TURNING TO ME. "AND I KNOW THE KING HAS A GREAT DEAL OF RESPECT FOR JEREMIAH, HE HAS TOLD ME SO. I HOPE THIS LETTER WILL DO SOME GOOD. THE KING AGREED TO MY SUGGESTION THAT THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE BE GIVEN A SPECIAL SETTLEMENT, THOUGH SOME OF HIS ADVISERS WERE AGAINST IT, FEARING THAT THIS WOULD WORK AGAINST THEIR ASSIMILATION INTO THE NATIONAL LIFE. OF COURSE THEY ARE HOMELESS NOW, WISHING THEY COULD GO BACK. I EVEN WISH IT MYSELF SOMETIMES."

HE LED US TO THE OPEN WINDOW, AND POINTED TO THE WEST. "JERUSALEM!" HE EXCLAIMED, TEARS IN HIS EYES.

DANIEL POINTED TO THE WEST. "THAT," HE SAID, "AS NEARLY AS I CAN FIGURE IT, IS THE DIRECTION OF JERUSALEM. AND EVERY TIME I SAY MY PRAYERS I TURN IN THAT DIRECTION. NOT BUT WHAT YAHWEH IS JUST AS MUCH PRESENT HERE AS HE IS THERE, BUT THAT IS HIS SPECIAL CITY, WHATEVER MAY HAPPEN TO IT. I DON'T WANT TO FORGET, EVER." HIS VOICE WAS CHARGED WITH EMOTION. "AND MAYBE SOME DAY, IN THE FAR DISTANT FUTURE, GOD WILL OPEN UP A WAY FOR US TO GO BACK. JEREMIAH SAYS SEVENTY YEARS. I'VE BEEN HERE NEARLY TWELVE. IF HE COUNTS FROM THE TIME WHEN OUR FIRST GROUP CAME, THAT WOULD BE FIFTY-EIGHT TO GO. I MIGHT EVEN LIVE TO SEE IT. I LIKE TO DREAM, THAT JUST AS YAHWEH LED HIS PEOPLE THROUGH THE SEA WHEN THEY CAME OUT OF EGYPT, HE MIGHT OPEN UP A WAY THROUGH THE DESERT, AND LEAD US BACK TO THE PROMISED LAND. BUT THAT'S A LONG WAY OFF," HE ADDED, CHANGING HIS TONE COMPLETELY. RIGHT NOW WE HAVE A SITUATION TO DEAL WITH. BUT I WANT A COPY OF THAT LETTER."

HE TAPPED A LITTLE BELL, AND A CLERK CAME IN. DANIEL GAVE HIM THE ARAMMAIC COPY OF THE LETTER, SAYING, "GET A SAFARU TO MAKE A COPY OF THIS." A SAFARU, HE EXPLAINED, WAS A SCRIBE WHO COULD WRITE ARAMMAIC, RATHER THAN ONE WHO WROTE THE CUNEIFORM SCRIPT.

DANIEL LOOKED AT ME. "AND WHAT ABOUT YOU, YOUNG FELLOW?" HE SAID. "ARE YOU LEARNING YOUR FATHER'S ART?"

"I'M AFRAID I HAVEN'T ANY GIFT FOR THAT," I SAID. "I TRIED HARD FOR A YEAR, BUT I AM CONVINCED IT IS NOT FOR ME."

"WELL, THAT'S THE WAY IT GOES SOMETIMES," HE SAID. "WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS? WHAT ARE YOU INTERESTED IN?"

"I LIKE TO STUDY LANGUAGES," I SAID. "I HAVE STUDIED EGYPTIAN WITH A FRIEND, AND MADE A PRETTY GOOD START IN IT. AND WE HAD A GREEK SLAVE WHO TAUGHT ME TO SPEAK GREEK, AND TO READ AND WRITE IT, TOO."

"GOOD!" HE EXCLAIMED. "WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN AN APPOINTMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY?"

"I THINK SO," I SAID. "WHAT WOULD I HAVE TO DO?"

"I AM ON THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE UNIVERSITY," DANIEL SAID. "IT IS CLOSED RIGHT NOW, FOR HOLIDAYS. CLASSES WILL BEGIN AGAIN RIGHT AFTER THE EQUINOX. I'M SURE I CAN GET YOU AN APPOINTMENT. THE GOVERNMENT PAYS ALL THE COST, TUITION, BOARD AND ROOM, EVEN PROVIDES AN ALLOWANCE FOR PERSONAL EXPENSES."

"THAT SOUNDS WONDERFUL," I SAID. "BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FOOD? I'VE BEEN BROUGHT UP ON A VERY STRICT OBSERVANCE OF THE DIETARY LAWS."

DANIEL SMILED. "THAT DOES MAKE A PROBLEM. THE WAY I HANDLED IT, I SAID I WAS A VEGETARIAN, AND THEY LET ME LEAVE OFF MEAT ENTIRELY. AND I GOT ALONG VERY WELL. I EAT SOME MEAT NOW, BUT STILL LIKE VEGETABLES."

"I THINK I COULD MANAGE ALL RIGHT ON THAT," I SAID.

"NO PROBLEM, THEN," HE SAID, LAUGHING.

THE CLERK RETURNED WITH THE LETTER AND THE COPY, AND WE DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO GO. WE THANKED DANIEL FOR HIS ATTENTION.

"I'LL SEND YOU A NOTICE OF YOUR APPOINTMENT," HE SAID TO ME. "WE HAVE REGULAR COMMUNICATION WITH THE AUTHORITIES OUT THERE AT CHEDAR. I ASSUME YOU WILL BE SETTLING THERE."

"THAT IS OUR PLAN," SAID FATHER.

SO WE SAID FAREWELL, AND WENT OUT. MY HEAD FAR AWAY, SOMEWHERE UP AMONG THE CLOUDS.

CHEBAR

AUNT HANNAH AND THE CHILDREN WERE EAGER TO HEAR OF OUR VISIT WITH DANIEL, OUR FELLOW COUNTRYMAN WHO HAD ATTAINED SUCH DISTINCTION AND SUCCESS. WHEN I TOLD THEM OF DANIEL'S PROMISE TO GET ME AN APPOINTMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY THEY WERE GREATLY EXCITED. I WAS EXCITED TOO; I TRIED NOT TO SHOW HOW PROUD I WAS, BUT I AM SURE THEY COULD SEE IT.

THE NEXT DAY WOULD BE THE SABBATH. AUNT HANNAH WAS PREPARING THE SABBATH MEAL, TO BE EATEN SOON AFTER SUNSET. "WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT THE SHOP ON THE SABBATH?" FATHER ASKED UNCLE AZARIAH.

"NO PROBLEM AT ALL," HE SAID. "I JUST CLOSE IT UP AND PUT A SIGN ON THE DOOR WITH THE WORDS, 'CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY'." HE GOT OUT THE SIGN TO SHOW US. "THESE PEOPLE ARE VERY RELIGIOUS, AFTER THEIR FASHION. THEY HAVE SO MANY GODS AND GODDESSES THAT THEY ARE ALWAYS HAVING HOLIDAYS FOR THEM. SO WE OBSERVE THE DAY, AS OUR LAW REQUIRES, AND NOBODY THINKS ANYTHING OF IT."

AND WE DID OBSERVE IT. WE ATE THE SABBATH FEAST WITH JOY, SAID ALL THE RITUAL PRAYERS AND WENT TO BED. AND ALL THE NEXT DAY WE DID NO WORK, BUT SPENT THE DAY READING FROM THE TORAH AND THE PROPHETS, AND SINGING THE SONGS OF ZION. WE ATE WHAT WAS LEFT FROM THE FEAST UNTIL SUNSET, WHEN THE SABBATH WAS PAST, AND AUNT HANNAH COULD COOK AGAIN.

THE NEXT DAY WE SAID FAREWELL TO OUR HOSTS AND SET OUT ON THE THREE DAY JOURNEY TO CHEBAR, HAVING RECEIVED INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT THE ROADS. THE WEATHER WAS HOT, BUT SINCE WE WERE NO LONGER PART OF A BIG CARAVAN THERE WAS NOT MUCH TROUBLE WITH DUST. THE ROAD WAS WELL TRAVELED, WE PASSED MANY TOWNS AND VILLAGES, BUT THE THIRD DAY THE COUNTRY WAS MORE SPARSELY POPULATED, AS MUCH OF THE LAND WAS UNSUITABLE FOR CULTIVATION.

THE RIVER CHEBAR WAS A SMALL STREAM, A TRIBUTARY OF AN AFFLUENT OF THE EUPHRATES ON THE EASTERN SIDE. THE TOWN OF CHEBAR TOOK ITS NAME FROM THE RIVER. IT WAS AT THE EXTREME EASTERN EDGE OF THE ALLUVIAL PLAIN. THE RIVER CAME DOWN FROM THE HILLS. A DAM HAD BEEN CONSTRUCTED, AND A SERIES OF IRRIGATION CANALS. THIS HAD BEEN DONE BY A GOVERNMENT BUREAU, IN PREPARATION FOR THE SETTLEMENT OF THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH. IT APPEARED THAT THERE HAD BEEN A SETTLEMENT THERE IN OLDEN TIMES, FOR THERE WERE SOME RUINS OF ANCIENT BUILDINGS, AND MANY OLD DATE PALMS. NOW WITH THE COMING OF THE CAPTIVES A GOOD SIZED TOWN HAD SPRUNG UP. THERE WERE GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, AND HOMES, AND MANY SIGNS OF COMMERCE AND SMALL INDUSTRY. THE CAPTIVES COMPRISED MORE THAN HALF OF THE TOTAL POPULATION OF THE PLACE.

WE ARRIVED SHORTLY BEFORE SUNSET OF THE THIRD DAY OF TRAVEL. WE BEGAN MAKING INQUIRIES, AND PEOPLE SEEMED PLEASED WHEN WE ADDRESSED THEM IN HEBREW. SOON WE BEGAN TO FIND ACQUAINTANCES. WE ASKED ABOUT A YOUNG PRIEST NAMED EZEKIEL, A COUSIN OF OURS, AND WERE DIRECTED TO HIS HOUSE.

EZEKIEL WELCOMED US WARMLY. HE WAS TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD, HIS WIFE ABI A LITTLE YOUNGER. THERE WERE THREE CHILDREN, BIDKAR, TEN, HANNAH, SEVEN, AND JECOLIAH, THREE. WE WERE AFRAID THAT THEY WOULD BE EMBARRASSED AT HAVING FIVE VISITORS ARRIVE JUST AT MEALTIME, BUT AS IT HAPPENED THERE WAS NO PROBLEM. BIDKAR HAD BEEN FISHING IN THE IRRIGATION CANAL, AND HAD BEEN UNUSUALLY LUCKY. THERE WAS ENOUGH FISH FOR ALL, AND ABI HAD BEEN BAKING BREAD THAT DAY, SO THAT ALL WERE SATISFIED.

AFTER THE YOUNGER ONES HAD GONE TO BED WE ADULTS SAT FOR A LONG TIME TALKING -- CATCHING UP ON NEWS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS, CURRENT EVENTS, AND THE STATE OF THE COLONY.

"OUR PEOPLE SEEM TO BE DOING PRETTY WELL HERE," FATHER SAID, "TO JUDGE BY THE APPEARANCE OF THINGS."

"REALLY, THEY ARE," EZEKIEL SAID. "WHEN WE FIRST GOT HERE, THE PEOPLE WERE SO UTTERLY DISCOURAGED, IT WAS ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU WEEP. BUT WHEN WE FOUND THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD SET UP THIS PLACE JUST FOR US, PEOPLE BEGAN TO TAKE HEART. THE GOVERNMENT HAD SENT MEN HERE TO BUILD THE DAM, DIG CANALS, AND LAY OUT STREETS, MAKE BRICKS, EVEN BUILD HOUSES. IT WAS DANIEL'S DOING, DID YOU KNOW? HE HAS COME TO BE VERY INFLUENTIAL IN THE GOVERNMENT."

WE TOLD HIM ABOUT OUR VISIT WITH DANIEL, AND I HAD TO BOAST ABOUT HIS PROMISE OF AN APPOINTMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY.

"YOU ARE LUCKY," EZEKIEL SAID. "MAYBE YOU WILL BE A BIG SHOT TOO, ONE OF THESE DAYS."

"HOW MANY OF OUR PEOPLE ARE HERE?" FATHER ASKED.

"THERE MUST BE SIX OR SEVEN THOUSAND," EZEKIEL REPLIED. "OF COURSE MANY OF THE SKILLED WORKERS, SMITHS, AND CARPENTERS, AND SUCH, WERE OFFERED EMPLOYMENT IN THE CAPITAL, AND OTHER CITIES AND TOWNS AROUND, AND THEY HAVE SETTLED THERE. GOOD WAGES, I AM TOLD, AND OUR PEOPLE ARE WELL TREATED. WE GET NEWS OF THEM; THERE IS A GOOD DEAL OF PASSING."

"WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE LIVING HERE? WHAT DO THEY DO?"

"ALL SORTS OF THINGS. SOME HAVE GONE INTO BUSINESS, AND SEEM TO BE DOING WELL. ANYBODY THAT HAS NO OTHER OCCUPATION CAN FARM. THERE IS FREE LAND, WITH IRRIGATION RIGHTS. OF COURSE THEY HAVE TO PAY THE GOVERNMENT A FOURTH OF ALL THEY MAKE, BUT THE LAND IS VERY FERTILE, AND THEY ARE MAKING A GOOD LIVING."

WE HAD ALREADY TOLD THEM THE REASON FOR OUR COMING. EZEKIEL SAID HE WOULD GATHER THE ELDERS TOGETHER, TO HEAR THE LETTER READ.

"I THINK I'LL OPEN UP A JEWELRY SHOP HERE," FATHER SAID.

"I'M SURE IT WILL DO WELL," ABI SAID. "PEOPLE HAVE MONEY TO SPEND, AND YOU MUST KNOW HOW MUCH WOMEN DOTE ON JEWELRY."

"YES," FATHER SAID, LAUGHING. "I WAS COUNTING ON THAT."

ELASA TOLD ABOUT THE BOOKS HE HAD BROUGHT. EZEKIEL WAS DELIGHTED TO HEAR OF THEM. "THAT WILL BE A BIG HELP," HE SAID. "OUR PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW THE LAW. OF COURSE THE BOOKS ARE BIG AND CUMBERSOME, BUT IF YOU COULD MAKE COPIES OF CERTAIN PORTIONS, AS WELL AS WHOLE BOOKS, COPIES OF THE 'TEN WORDS', FOR INSTANCE, OR SOME OF THE SONGS, PEOPLE COULD PUT THEM UP IN THEIR HOUSES, AND THAT WOULD HELP THEM TO REMEMBER THAT THEY ARE REALLY GOD'S PEOPLE. I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE WOULD BE GLAD TO BUY THEM. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO MAKE A PRETTY GOOD LIVING THAT WAY."

"I'LL NEED A PLACE TO WORK, AND A HOUSE TO LIVE IN," ELASA SAID.

"AND SO WILL I," FATHER SAID. "THAT WILL BE THE FIRST THING WE'LL HAVE TO SEE ABOUT."

"BRICKS ARE PLENTIFUL AND CHEAP," SAID EZEKIEL. "IT WON'T COST MUCH TO BUILD HOUSES FOR YOU. YOU DO HAVE SOME MONEY, DON'T YOU?"

WE ASSURED HIM THAT WE HAD ENOUGH FOR OUR IMMEDIATE NEEDS.

"THE THING I MISS MOST," EZEKIEL SAID, "IS THE TEMPLE -- THE SACRIFICES, THE SOLEMN FEASTS, THE GATHERINGS IN THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM! AND ALL OUR PEOPLE DO, EVEN THOUGH SOME OF THEM WERE NOT VERY FAITHFUL IN ATTENDANCE WHEN THEY WERE THERE. BUT YOU KNOW, AS I HAVE THOUGHT OF IT, I THINK MAYBE THIS EXPERIENCE WILL BE GOOD FOR US. IT WILL TEACH US TO DEPEND ON GOD, NOT JUST ON THE TEMPLE. GOD HAS CAST US FAR AWAY AMONG THE HEATHEN, BUT HE IS STILL GOD! AND EVEN IF WE DON'T HAVE THE FEASTS, AND THE SACRIFICES, AND ALL THAT, IF WE CAN BE FAITHFUL IN OBSERVING HIS LAWS HERE, WE CAN KNOW THAT WE ARE STILL HIS PEOPLE."

"YES," FATHER AGREED. "I THINK YOU ARE RIGHT."

"AND MAYBE SOME DAY, AFTER WE HAVE BEEN PUNISHED ENOUGH BECAUSE OF THE UNFAITHFULNESS OF OUR PEOPLE, YAHWEH WILL MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO GO BACK TO OUR OWN LAND."

"IN THE LETTER, JEREMIAH SPEAKS OF SEVENTY YEARS," FATHER SAID.

"SEVENTY YEARS! THAT'S A LONG TIME TO WAIT. WE MAY NONE OF US LIVE TO SEE IT. BUT YAHWEH IS ALL POWERFUL, HE CAN DO WHATEVER HE DECIDES TO DO. IF WE WILL ONLY OBEY HIM, HE WILL SURELY DO IT."

WE SAID OUR PRAYERS, AND WENT TO REST. THE NEXT DAY THERE WAS A GATHERING OF THE ELDERS, AND FATHER READ JEREMIAH'S LETTER TO THEM. THEY LISTENED VERY ATTENTIVELY, BUT LOOKED VERY GLUM. "SEVENTY YEARS!" ONE OF THEM SAID. "THAT'S TOO LONG. WE WANT TO GO HOME NOW." OTHERS NODDED IN AGREEMENT.

"IT WILL HAVE TO BE AS YAHWEH DECIDES," SAID EZEKIEL. "JEREMIAH HAS SENT US A TRUE WORD FROM YAHWEH. WE CERTAINLY CAN'T GO HOME NOW. LET'S SETTLE DOWN AND MAKE THE BEST WE CAN OF THE SITUATION, AS JEREMIAH SAID."

THE ELDERS WENT AWAY, GRUMBLING. I HEARD ONE OF THEM MUTTERING, "IF WE CAN GET SOME HELP FROM EGYPT WE WON'T HAVE TO WAIT SEVENTY YEARS." IF EZEKIEL HEARD IT HE TOOK NO NOTICE.

EVIL - M.ROUK

FATHER AND ELASA WENT TO THE GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL AND SECURED TITLES TO BUILDING SITES ON THE PRINCIPAL STREETS OF THE TOWN. THEY SOUGHT OUT MASONS TO BUILD HOUSES FOR THEM. THE PLAN WAS TO BUILD SO THAT THE FRONT PART COULD BE THE STORE, OR WORK ROOM, AND THE LIVING QUARTERS WOULD BE AT THE REAR. THE LOTS WERE LARGE ENOUGH TO HAVE A GARDEN BACK OF THEM, AND WATER FOR IRRIGATION COULD BE DRAWN FROM THE CANAL.

BESIDES THE HIRED BUILDERS, WE ALL HELPED WITH THE CONSTRUCTION, AND THE WORK WENT FORWARD VERY RAPIDLY. BUT IN THE MEANTIME WE LIVED AT EZEKIEL'S HOME UNTIL THE HOUSES SHOULD BE READY. IT WAS CROWDED, BUT WE WERE ALL HAPPY TOGETHER. EZEKIEL HAD A PLOT OF GROUND WITH A SECOND CROP OF WHEAT COMING ALONG NICELY, AND ALSO A VEGETABLE GARDEN. HE HAD PLANTED VINES AND FIG TREES, AND IN THEIR THIRD YEAR THEY WERE PRODUCING REMARKABLY WELL, ESPECIALLY THE VINES.

WHEN WE HAD BEEN THERE ABOUT TWO WEEKS A MESSENGER CAME, BRINGING A TABLET OF BAKED CLAY, INSCRIBED WITH THE OFFICIAL NOTIFICATION OF MY APPOINTMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY. WITH IT CAME A LETTER FROM DANIEL, WRITTEN IN HEBREW, GIVING DETAILS OF THE TIME AND PLACE WHERE I SHOULD REPORT.

I WAS TO REPORT ON THE DAY FOLLOWING THE NEW MOON, JUST AFTER THE EQUINOX. THE LETTER EXPLAINED THAT IN ADDITION TO MY ROOM AND BOARD AND TUITION I WOULD RECEIVE AN ALLOWANCE OF TEN TEKELS A MONTH FOR MY PERSONAL EXPENSES. (SHEKEL, IN HEBREW, BECOMES TEKEL IN ARAMIC. 30 TEKELS ONE MIN)

IT WAS STILL TEN DAYS BEFORE TIME FOR ME TO START MY JOURNEY TO THE BIG CITY. I WAS ALL EAGERNESS TO GO. ABI HELPED ME SET MY CLOTHES IN ORDER. FATHER GAVE ME ENOUGH MONEY TO GET A NEW SUIT OF CLOTHES AFTER I GOT THERE AND FOUND OUT WHAT SORT OF CLOTHES MY FELLOW STUDENTS WOULD BE WEARING. ALL MY BELONGINGS WERE PACKED INTO A BAG, WHICH WAS FITTED WITH STRAPS FOR ATTACHING TO MY SHOULDERS. MY FIVE SILVER SHEKELS ABI SEWED INTO THE HEM OF MY TUNIC. I HOPED THEY WOULD BE SAFE THERE.

NOTWITHSTANDING MY EAGERNESS, WHEN IT CAME TIME TO GO THERE WAS A LUMP IN MY THROAT, AND I FOUND IT HARD TO SWALLOW MY BREAKFAST. I PUT ON A GOLD FRONT, LIKE I WAS SETTING OUT TO CONQUER THE WORLD, BUT INWARDLY I WAS VERY MUCH AFRAID. BUT I MANAGED TO TELL THEM ALL GOOD-BYE WITHOUT SHEDDING ANY TEARS. AS I HUGGED JERUSHA I NOTICED THAT SHE WAS BEGINNING TO ROUND OUT, AND I REFLECTED THAT IN A FEW YEARS SHE WOULD BE A WOMAN. I HAD ALWAYS BEEN FOND OF HER. IN A FEW YEARS, I THOUGHT.....WHAT MAY HAPPEN?

THERE WERE ALWAYS PEOPLE PASSING TO AND FROM THE GREAT CITY, AND THE TOWNS AND VILLAGES BETWEEN. I JOINED A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO WERE TRAVELING TOGETHER. THERE IS ALWAYS GREATER SAFETY IN NUMBERS. THE COUNTRY SEEMED TO BE WELL POLICED, BUT ONE NEVER KNEW WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN. AS IT WAS, WE ALL MADE THE TRIP WITHOUT INCIDENT, CAMPING OUT THE TWO NIGHTS INVOLVED.

AFTER MAKING MANY INQUIRIES I FOUND THE PLACE INDICATED IN DANIEL'S LETTER. I HAD STARTED EARLY, BUT STILL WAS BY NO MEANS THE FIRST TO ARRIVE. OTHERS WERE COMING IN SHORTLY. ALL FIRST YEAR STUDENTS, I GATHERED. ALL OF THEM WERE OLDER THAN I, MANY LOOKED TO BE TWENTY YEARS OLD, OR OLDER, ALREADY WITH WELL ESTABLISHED BEARDS. I LEARNED FROM CONVERSATION WITH OTHERS THAT EACH YEAR THERE WERE 30 NEW APPOINTEES TO THE UNIVERSITY -- THREE SIXTIES (EVERYTHING GOES BY SIXTIES IN THIS COUNTRY). TWO SIXTIES WERE DESIGNATED FOR THE MILITARY, AND WOULD BECOME OFFICERS WHEN THE COURSE WAS COMPLETED. THOSE IN THE THIRD SIXTY ARE ELIGIBLE ON GRADUATION FOR VARIOUS GOVERNMENT POSTS.

A GONG SOUNDED, AND THE OFFICIALS ENTERED AND TOOK THEIR SEATS AT DESKS HERE AND THERE. EACH ONE WAS ACCOMPANIED BY TWO OR MORE CLERKS WHO MADE READY TO WRITE AT SMALL TABLES. THE NEW STUDENTS FORMED A LINE, AND I TOOK MY PLACE IN IT, ABOUT NUMBER FORTY, AS NEARLY AS I COULD COUNT. BECAUSE ALL THE OTHERS WERE LARGER I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SURPRISED IF THEY HAD PUSHED ME BACK TO THE LAST PLACE, BUT THEY SEEMED TO HAVE SOME SENSE OF FAIR PLAY, AND THERE WAS NO SCUFFLING FOR POSITION. THE LINE MOVED SLOWLY, BUT AT LAST I FOUND MYSELF AT THE FIRST DESK, WHERE I PRESENTED MY CERTIFICATE OF APPOINTMENT. THE CLERK TOOK MY NAME, WRITING IT AS IT WAS WRITTEN ON THE APPOINTMENT IN THE CUNEIFORM SCRIPT, ASKED MY AGE, AND PLACE OF ORIGIN, RECORDING THE INFORMATION ON A CLAY TABLET. EACH TABLET WAS ON A BOARD, AND AS IT WAS COMPLETED AN ATTENDANT WOULD CARRY IT AWAY, FOR BAKING AND FILING, NO DOUBT, AND PLACE A FRESH TABLET READY FOR THE CLERK. EVERYTHING WAS VERY WELL ORGANIZED, I THOUGHT.

WHEN THE CLERK HAD FINISHED WRITING MY RECORD HE CALLED HIS CHIEF'S ATTENTION TO SOMETHING ON MY CERTIFICATE. THE CHIEF LOOKED AT IT, HANDS ME THE CERTIFICATE AND POINTED TO A DESK IN A FAR CORNER, WHERE THERE WAS ANOTHER LINE, A MUCH SHORTER ONE THIS TIME. I TOOK MY PLACE IN IT.

WHEN MY TURN CAME, THE MAN AT THE DESK LOOKED ME OVER KEENLY. HE WAS A LARGE MAN, ALMOST BALD, BUT WITH A LUXURIOUS BLACK BEARD, WAXED AND BRAIDED IN THE CURRENT STYLE. HE LOOKED AT THE WRITING ON THE CERTIFICATE. "SO YOU ARE FOR THE DIPLOMATIC SERVICE," HE SAID.

IT WAS NEWS TO ME; I HAD BEEN UNABLE TO READ THE WRITING, BUT THE IDEAL YOUNG MAN SOUNDED ATTRACTIVE. "YES SIR," I ANSWERED.

HE INQUIRED ABOUT MY LANGUAGE STUDY, SEEMED PLEASED TO HEAR OF MY GREEK, AND QUESTIONED ME SOME IN EGYPTIAN, SEEMING TO BE PLEASED WITH MY ANSWERS.

"YOU WILL HAVE TO TAKE A COURSE IN REMEDIAL AKKADIAN," HE SAID, BUT I'M GOING TO ASSIGN YOU TO THE SECOND YEAR CLASS IN GREEK AND EGYPTIAN. YOU WILL BE TAKING SUMERO-AKKADIAN HISTORY, AND MATHEMATICS. I THINK THAT'S ABOUT AS MUCH YOU CAN HANDLE THIS YEAR."

HE PASSED ME ON TO A CLERK WHO MADE OUT MY CLASS SCHEDULE, WRITING IT ON PAPER IN ARAMAIC, WHICH MADE IT MUCH MORE CONVENIENT FOR ME.

THERE HAD BEEN ONLY TWO BEFORE ME IN THE LINE FOR THE DIPLOMATIC SERVICE. THE LAST ONE WAS YOUNG, JUST ABOUT MY AGE, I THOUGHT, AND SEEMED EVEN YOUNGER BECAUSE HE WAS FAIR HAired. HE SMILED AT ME AS HE STOOD WAITING HIS TURN, AND I SMILED IN RETURN, THEN DECIDED TO WAIT FOR HIM BEFORE GOING ON TO THE NEXT ASSIGNMENT. HE AND I SEEMED TO BE THE YOUNGEST OF THE WHOLE CLASS, THE ONLY ONES WITH NO BEARD. MY FACE WAS SHOWING SOME BLUE FUZZ, BUT WHATEVER FUZZ THERE WAS ON HIS FACE WAS SO PALE IT COULD HARDLY BE SEEN.

WHEN HE HAD FINISHED MAKING OUT HIS SCHEDULE WE WALKED ON TOGETHER, SIDES BEING THE YOUNGEST, I NOTICED THAT WE WERE BOTH LEFT HANDED, WHICH GAVE US SOMETHING IN COMMON.

I INTRODUCED MYSELF. HE TOLD ME HIS NAME WAS EVIL-MARDUK. WHEN I REMARKED ON HIS FAIR COMPLEXION HE EXPLAINED THAT HIS MOTHER WAS FROM UP IN THE CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS, AND SAID HE SPOKE KURDISH AND PERSIAN. I HAD NOTED THAT PEOPLE SEEMED TO TREAT HIM WITH SOME DEFFERENCE, BUT WE HAD BEEN FRIENDS FOR SOME TIME BEFORE I LEARNED THAT HE WAS A SON OF NEBUCHADREZZAR — NOT THE ELDEST SON BY ANY MEANS, BUT A SON OF ONE OF THE KING'S MANY WIVES.

AT THE FIRST EVENING MEAL I FACED MY FIRST HURDLE. THE WAITER CAME AROUND WITH A THICK SOUP, WITH CHUNKS OF MEAT IN IT, OF UNCERTAIN ORIGIN. WE WERE SEATED AT LONG TABLES, TWELVE OF US AT EACH TABLE. AS THE WAITER LADLED THE SOUP INTO BOWLS, THE FELLOWS WERE JOKING ABOUT IT, SOME MAKING RUDE JOKES ABOUT WHAT MIGHT BE IN IT.

"I NEVER EAT SOUP AWAY FROM HOME, BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS IN IT," ONE MAN SAID. "AND I NEVER EAT SOUP AT HOME BECAUSE I DO KNOW WHAT IS IN IT."

THE WAITER HESITATED, UNCERTAIN WHETHER TO PUT THE SOUP IN THE BOWL. "PUT IT IN," THE MAN SAID. "I'LL EAT IT. THIS ISN'T SOUP, THIS IS SLUR."

ALL THE FELLOWS LAUGHED, EVEN THE WAITER GIGGLED A LITTLE. WHEN IT CAME TO ME, I DECLINED IT. "I'M A VEGETARIAN," I SAID.

"THAT'S ALL RIGHT," A MAN ACROSS THE TABLE SAID. "THERE'S NOT ENOUGH MEAT IN THIS TO COUNT." THAT BROUGHT ON MORE LAUGHTER.

EVIL-MARDUK WAS SEATED NEXT ME. "YOU'LL STARVE TO DEATH HERE," HE SAID.

"OH, I'LL BE ALL RIGHT," I SAID. I HAD NOTICED THAT BREAD WAS PLENTYFUL, THERE WAS A DISH OF LENTILS, AND SOME FRUIT. AND I MADE A VERY SATISFACTORY MEAL, THOUGH I CONFESS MY MOUTH WATERED FOR THE SOUP, AND THE MEAT. THE FELLOWS LOOKED AT ME LIKE I WAS SOME KIND OF FREAK, BUT THEY SOON GOT USED TO MY WAY OF DOING.

THE UPPER CLASSMEN LOOKED ON THE NEWCOMERS WITH CONTEMPT. THEY CALLED US "RATS", AND ORDERED US AROUND, REQUIRING US TO FETCH AND CARRY FOR THEM. NOW AND THEN AN UPPER CLASSMAN WOULD CUFF ONE OF THE NEW MEN, NOT WITH ANY MALICE, BUT JUST TO SHOW THEIR SUPERIORITY. THEY EVEN CUFFED THE PRINCE A FEW TIMES, TO LET HIM KNOW THAT EVEN THE KING'S SON WAS STILL A STUDENT, AND SHOULD EXPECT TO BE TREATED AS SUCH. HE TOOK IT PRETTY WELL, TOO, THERE WAS NO POINT IN RESENTING IT, IT WAS JUST PART OF THE SYSTEM. I THINK I GOT OFF LIGHTER THAN MOST, BECAUSE OF MY FRIENDSHIP WITH EVIL-MARDUK. SINCE HE AND I WERE THE YOUNGEST, THEY NICKNAMED US "MICE", INSTEAD OF "RATS". "HERE, MOUSE," THEY WOULD SAY, "BRING ME A WRITING TABLET," OR OTHER MENIAL DUTY. WE DID AS WE WERE TOLD, AND BEFORE LONG THINGS QUIETED DOWN, AND WE WERE JUST FELLOW STUDENTS.

JECONIAH

MILITARY TRAINING WAS A PART OF THE UNIVERSITY LIFE, NOT ONLY FOR THOSE DESTINED FOR MILITARY SERVICE, BUT FOR ALL THE STUDENTS. WE HAD MARCHING DRILL, TRAINING IN THE USE OF WEAPONS, AND GYMNASIAC EXERCISES. IT WAS A CHORE, BUT WE GOT USED TO IT, AND I AM SURE THE EXERCISE WAS GOOD FOR US.

MY FIRST TASK WAS TO LEARN TO READ AND WRITE THE AKKADIAN LANGUAGE. THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE WAS NOT SO BAD. I WAS PICKING IT UP FAST. AFTER ALL, THE VERB STRUCTURE WAS NOT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM HEBREW AND ARAMAIC. BUT READING AND WRITING IT WAS SOMETHING ELSE. THERE WERE OVER 300 SIGNS IN LIST OF THOSE IN REGULAR USE, WHICH HAD TO BE MEMORIZED. (AND I WAS ALWAYS DISCOVERING SIGNS SELDOM USED, WHICH WERE NOT ON THE LIST, OR VARIANT FORMS OF THE REGULAR SIGNS.) EACH SIGN WAS MADE UP OF THE WEDGE SHAPED MARKS, LARGE ONES, SMALL ONES, VERTICAL OR HORIZONTAL, ANYWHERE FROM ONE TO TEN OR MORE IN ONE SIGN. THE SIGNS STOOD FOR SYLLABLES, WHICH WERE PUT TOGETHER TO FORM WORDS. BUT THE SAME SIGN AT TIMES STOOD FOR FIVE OR SIX DIFFERENT SYLLABLES, APPARENTLY UNRELATED. AND BESIDES THAT, SOME OF THE SIGNS TURNED OUT TO BE, NOT SYLLABLES AT ALL, BUT WHOLE WORDS. THEY REFERRED TO THOSE AS IDEOGRAMS. AND BESIDES THAT, SOME WERE DETERMINATIVES, INDICATING THE SORT OF WORD THAT WAS COMING NEXT. IT WAS A COMPLICATED MESS, I THOUGHT.

I TALKED TO MY TEACHER ABOUT IT. "WHY SEEMS SUCH A COMPLICATED WAY OF WRITING," I SAID. "THE ALPHABETIC WRITING IS SO MUCH SIMPLER."

"OF COURSE IT IS," HE AGREED. "AND IT IS BOUND TO DISPLACE THIS SYSTEM EVENTUALLY, NO DOUBT ABOUT IT. IT IS THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE, AS THEY SAY. BUT AT LEAST THIS IS AN ADVANCEMENT OVER THE EGYPTIAN SYSTEM, WITH PICTURES OF BIRDS, AND SUCH. MARDUK PITY ANYBODY THAT HAS TO WRITE THAT STUFF."

I LAUGHED. I WAS STUDYING EGYPTIAN, AS HE KNEW.

"NEXT YEAR," HE SAID, "IF THE GODS ARE FAVORABLE, YOU WILL BE IN MY CLASS IN SUMERIAN. YOU DON'T REALLY APPRECIATE AKKADIAN UNTIL YOU KNOW SUMERIAN. THE TWO LANGUAGES ARE MIXED UP SO THAT YOU HAVE TO KNOW BOTH TO KNOW EITHER OF THEM. BUT YOU ARE DOING FINE. KEEP PLUGGING AWAY, YOU'LL GET IT."

AND I DID, EVENTUALLY, AND OTHER THINGS EVEN WORSE.

IT WAS ABOUT SIX WEEKS AFTER I ENTERED THE UNIVERSITY BEFORE I HAD ANY CONTACT WITH DANIEL. THEN ONE DAY A MESSENGER APPEARED WITH A NOTE, INVITING ME TO DINE AT HIS HOME THE NEXT SABBATH EVE, AND BRING A FRIEND WITH ME IF I SAW FIT. I ASKED EVIL-MARDUK IF HE WOULD LIKE TO GO WITH ME, AND HE SAID HE WOULD BE HAPPY TO DO SO.

WE PUT ON OUR BEST CLOTHES, AND WENT TO THE ADDRESS SHOWN ON THE INVITATION, ARRIVING ABOUT AN HOUR BEFORE SUNSET. THE HOT WEATHER HAD BROKEN AT LAST, THERE HAD BEEN SOME RAIN THE DAY BEFORE, AND THE EVENING WAS DELIGHTFULLY COOL. DANIEL'S HOUSE WAS RATHER MODEST, I THOUGHT, FOR A MAN IN HIS HIGH POSITION, BUT INSIDE IT WAS NICELY APPOINTED, THE FURNITURE LOOKED LIKE IT MUST HAVE BEEN VERY EXPENSIVE. A SERVANT MET US AT THE DOOR, AND ASSISTED WITH THE CUSTOMARY CEREMONY OF WASHING HANDS AND FEET, AFTER WHICH WE WERE LED INTO A ROOM WHERE DANIEL GREETED US WARMLY. HE KNEW THE PRINCE BY SIGHT, BUT APPARENTLY HAD NOT HAD MUCH CONTACT WITH HIM. HE SEEMED TO BE PLEASED THAT EVIL-MARDUK AND I HAD BECOME FRIENDS.

WE CONVERSED FOR A WHILE, ABOUT THE WEATHER, AND THE LIFE AT THE UNIVERSITY. WHEN A SERVANT ANNOUNCED DINNER WE WENT TO ANOTHER ROOM, WHERE THE FAMILY AWAITED US. DANIEL MADE THE INTRODUCTIONS.

"THIS IS MY WIFE, TAMAR," HE SAID, "MY SON ISAIAH, MY DAUGHTER RUTH, AND MY SON ZECHARIAH." ISAIAH WAS A VERY THOUGHTFUL LOOKING LITTLE BOY OF SEVEN, RUTH WAS A MERRY FIVE YEAR OLD, AND ZECHARIAH WAS PROBABLY NOT THREE YET.

"I HAVE A SISTER NAMED TAMAR," I SAID.

SOME PEOPLE THINK IT IS AN UNLUCKY NAME," DANIEL SAID. "IN THE HISTORY OF OUR PEOPLE THERE WERE WOMEN WITH THAT NAME WHO HAD SOME VERY UNFORTUNATE EXPERIENCES. BUT I STILL THINK IT IS A GOOD NAME, A BEAUTIFUL NAME."

"SO DO I," I SAID.

"AND SO DO I," TAMAR SAID, AND WE ALL LAUGHED.

AFTER THE RITUAL PRAYERS IN HEBREW, WE CARRIED ON OUR CONVERSATION IN ARAMAIC. WE WERE ALL FLUENT IN THAT TONGUE. I HAD BEEN GIVING EVIL-MARDUK SOME LESSONS IN HEBREW, BUT HE STILL HAD NO GREAT FLUENCY IN IT.

"WE SPEAK HEBREW IN THE FAMILY," DANIEL EXPLAINED, BECAUSE WE WANT TO MAKE SURE OUR CHILDREN KEEP THEIR MOTHER TONGUE. BUT SOME OF OUR SERVANTS SPEAK ARAMAIC, SOME AKKADIAN. OUR CHILDREN ARE REALLY TRILINGUAL."

"A LITTLE LIKE MY CASE," SAID EVIL-MARDUK. "MY MOTHER NEVER SPOKE TO ME IN ANYTHING BUT PERSIAN, BUT I HAD A NURSE WHO ALWAYS SPOKE KURDISH. MY MOTHER DIED WHEN I WAS TWELVE, BUT I HAVE ALWAYS MANAGED TO KEEP UP THOSE TONGUES."

I HAD BEEN WONDERING ABOUT TAMAR. SHE APPEARED TO BE IN HER MID TWENTIES, AND BY THE AGES OF THE CHILDREN SHE COULD NOT POSSIBLY BE ONE OF THE TEN THOUSAND (WE CALLED IT THAT, AS A ROUND NUMBER) CAPTIVES BROUGHT FROM JERUSALEM ONLY TWO YEARS BEFORE. YET SHE WAS CERTAINLY A HEBREW. HOW HAD THIS COME ABOUT, I WONDERED. I DECIDED TO ASK HER.

"WERE YOU ONE OF THE GROUP BROUGHT OVER HERE THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, WHEN YOUR HUSBAND CAME?"

"No," she said, "I WAS BORN HERE. MY ANCESTORS WERE AMONG THOSE BROUGHT BY THE ASSYRIANS AFTER SAMARIA WAS TAKEN, OVER A HUNDRED YEARS AGO. MY PEOPLE WERE SETTLED IN HALAN, THERE IS STILL A VIGOROUS ISRAELITE COMMUNITY THERE, BUT MY PARENTS MOVED TO BAE-ILU, AND I WAS BORN HERE. BUT WE KEPT UP OUR TRADITIONS, AND OUR LANGUAGE. MY FATHER WAS AN EPHRAIMITE."

THAT BROUGHT ON A DISCUSSION OF THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL.

"THERE ARE A GOOD MANY ISRAELITE PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY," DANIEL SAID. SOME OF THEM HAVE INTERMARRIED WITH OTHER PEOPLE, AND HAVE COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN THAT THEY ARE ISRAELITES. SOME HAVE KEPT THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS AND CLAIM TO BE WORSHIPERS OF YAHWEH. BUT THE TRIBAL STRUCTURE HAS COME TO MEAN LESS AND LESS; MANY OF THEM COULD NOT TELL WHAT TRIBE THEIR ANCESTORS USED TO BE."

ISAIAH HAD BEEN VERY QUIET, BUT AS THERE WAS A LULL IN THE CONVERSATION HE SPOKE TO EVIL-MARDUK: "YOU ARE THE KING'S SON. DOES THAT MEAN THAT YOU WILL BE KING SOME DAY?"

"NOT LIKELY," EVIL-MARDUK SAID, LAUGHING. "I HAVE FIVE BROTHERS OLDER THAN I, AND I THINK MY CHANCE OF BEING KING IS PRETTY SLIM. MY FATHER, MAY HE LIVE FOREVER, WILL SURELY CHOOSE ONE OF MY BROTHERS TO SUCCEED HIM."

"THEN WHAT WILL YOU BE?" ISAIAH CONTINUED.

"MOST LIKELY I'LL BE A DRIED-UP OLD UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR," THE PRINCE ANSWERED. ALL THE CHILDREN BURST OUT LAUGHING AT SUCH A SILLY IDEA.

THE FOOD WAS DELICIOUS. I ACCEPTED A SECOND PORTION OF THE ROAST LAMB. "I SEE YOU ARE NOT A VEGETARIAN TONIGHT," EVIL-MARDUK SAID.

I HAD ALREADY EXPLAINED TO HIM ABOUT OUR DIETARY RULES, CLEAN AND UNCLEAN MEATS. "WHEN I GET A CHANCE AT MEAT THAT IS LAWFUL FOR ME TO EAT I TRY TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME," I SAID.

DANIEL BROUGHT UP ANOTHER SUBJECT. "I WAS AT THE PALACE YESTERDAY," HE SAID, "AND SAW ALL THE CONQUERED KINGS -- TWENTY-ONE OF THEM! SOME HAD BEEN THERE A LONG TIME. THEY ARE TREATED WELL, BUT THEY ARE MADE CONSCIOUS ALL THE TIME THAT THEY ARE PRISONERS. SOME OF THEM SEEM RECONCILED TO THAT STATE OF AFFAIRS, SOME ARE TAKING IT HARD. I SPOKE TO JECONIAH. HE SEEMED VERY DEPRESSED."

"WHO IS JECONIAH?" EVIL-MARDUK ASKED.

"HE WAS OUR KING IN JERUSALEM," I EXPLAINED, "FOR JUST THREE MONTHS. HIS FATHER, JEHIAKIM, REVOLTED AGAINST YOUR FATHER'S GOVERNMENT, EXPECTING TO GET HELP FROM EGYPT, WHICH HE NEVER GOT. WHEN THE AKKADIAN ARMY CAME AND SURROUNDED JERUSALEM, JEHIAKIM TOOK SICK AND DIED, AND JECONIAH, WHO WAS JUST EIGHTEEN, WAS CROWNED KING. THERE WAS NOTHING FOR HIM TO DO BUT SURRENDER, AND TAKE WHATEVER CONDITIONS YOUR FATHER IMPOSED. THAT WAS JUST THREE YEARS AGO, SO NOW HE IS ONE OF THE TWENTY-ONE CAPTIVE KINGS ON DISPLAY AT THE PALACE. AND BESIDES, ABOUT TEN THOUSAND OF OUR PEOPLE WERE BROUGHT OVER HERE, AND SETTLED AT CHENAN. MOST OF THEM. AND THAT'S HOW I HAPPENED TO BE HERE. I CAME WITH MY FATHER, WHO WAS SENT WITH AN EMBASSAGE TO THEM."

"MY FATHER RULES WITH A STRONG HAND," EVIL-MARDUK SAID. "I THINK I'D LIKE TO GO AND SEE THOSE CAPTIVE KINGS SOME DAY. I HAD HEARD OF THEM, BUT HAD NEVER THOUGHT MUCH ABOUT THEM."

"I'D LIKE TO GO WITH YOU," I SAID.

"LET'S ALL THREE GO TOGETHER," DANIEL SAID. "MAYBE WE CAN CHEER THEM UP A LITTLE."

THAT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA, AND WE TALKED IT OVER AND AGREED ON A DAY FOR THE VISIT TO THE PALACE. THEN WE SAID OUR FAREWELLS, AND STARTED BACK TO OUR UNIVERSITY QUARTERS.

AS WE WALKED THROUGH THE STREETS EVIL-MARDUK SAID THOUGHTFULLY, "I KNOW GOD BELIEVES IN RULING WITH AN IRON HAND, BUT I WONDER IF IT IS NECESSARY TO TREAT CONQUERED KINGS LIKE THAT."

"WHEN YOU GET TO BE KING, MAYBE YOU CAN INSTITUTE SOME REFORMS," I SAID.

"FAT CHANCE OF THAT!" SAID EVIL-MARDUK.

NEBUCHADREZZAR

ON THE DAY APPOINTED, EVIL-MARDUK AND I WENT TO THE BUILDING WHERE DANIEL HAD HIS OFFICES, AND DANIEL WENT WITH US TO THE ROYAL PALACE. IT WAS A SORT OF STATE VISIT, AND WE WERE ACCOMPANIED BY AN HONOR GUARD OF TWELVE SOLDIERS. I HAD NOT UNDERSTOOD THAT IT WAS SUCH AN IMPORTANT OCCASION. I WAS WEARING MY BEST CLOTHES, WHICH WERE NOT VERY FINE. EVIL-MARDUK WAS DRESSED MODESTLY, BUT DANIEL WORE A VERY FINE ROBE, WITH A LOT OF DECORATIONS.

I HAD SEEN THE PALACE BEFORE, FROM A DISTANCE. EVERYBODY IN THE CITY HAD SEEN IT; IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO SEE IT. IT STOOD THREE FULL STORIES HIGHER THAN THE SURROUNDING BUILDINGS, AND WAS FINISHED ALL IN MARBLE AND LAPIS LAZULI, SO THAT ITS TOWERS GLEAMED IN THE SUN. BUT OF COURSE I HAD NEVER DARED TO GO NEAR IT, MUCH LESS GO INSIDE. BUT THIS TIME WE WENT RIGHT TO THE MAIN ENTRANCE, WHERE OUR HONOR GUARD STOOD ASIDE, AND ANOTHER GUARD OF PALACE ATTENDANTS USHERED US UP THE GREAT STAIRS, AND ALONG THE CORRIDORS.

APPARENTLY DANIEL HAD MADE ARRANGEMENTS THAT WE WERE TO BE SHOWN THE STATE PRISONERS. THEY OCCUPIED A CERTAIN WING OF THE PALACE, WHERE THEY HAD APARTMENTS, AND WERE ALLOWED TO HAVE THEIR FAMILIES AND SERVANTS WITH THEM. THEY WERE TREATED LIKE KINGS, BUT LIKE CAPTIVE KINGS, REQUIRED TO WEAR A CERTAIN TYPE OF CLOTHING, SYMBOLIC OF THEIR CAPTIVE STATE. WE WERE SHOWN THE WHOLE GALAXY OF APARTMENTS, AND THEN USHERED INTO THAT OF JECONIAH, THE CAPTIVE, DEPOSED, KING OF JUDAH.

THE APARTMENT WAS WELL APPOINTED, BUT JECONIAH WAS A VERY UNHAPPY YOUNG MAN, IN DEEP DEPRESSION. DANIEL TALKED TO HIM IN HEBREW. I WAS INTRODUCED TO HIM, BUT HE TOOK LITTLE NOTICE OF ME. WHEN EVIL-MARDUK WAS PRESENTED, JECONIAH WAS IMPRESSED BY THE INFORMATION THAT HE WAS THE KING'S SON, ALBEIT ONE OF THE YOUNGER SONS. JECONIAH CONVERSED WITH HIM A LITTLE, IN ARAMAIC, BUT SOON REVERTED TO HEBREW, TALKING TO DANIEL.

"I CAN'T SEE HOW YAHWEH COULD LET A THING LIKE THIS HAPPEN TO ME," HE SAID. "I OFFERED MANY ANIMALS IN SACRIFICE AT THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM, AND I THINK YAHWEH SHOULD HAVE PROTECTED ME."

DANIEL EXPLAINED TO HIM THAT YAHWEH OFTEN ACTS IN WAYS WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND, URGED HIM TO BUCK UP AND ACT LIKE A KING, EVEN IF HE WAS A CAPTIVE. "TAKE COURAGE, AND TRUST GOD," DANIEL SAID. "YAHWEH IS STILL GOD, NO MATTER WHERE WE ARE." BUT JECONIAH STILL SEEMED DEPRESSED.

JECONIAH'S WIFE, HEPHZIDAH, CAME IN, WITH SHEALTIEL, A BRIGHT EYED BOY ABOUT FIVE YEARS OLD. SHE SEEMED MUCH MORE CHEERFUL THAN HER HUSBAND, GREETED US IN A FRIENDLY MANNER, AND CALLED IN A SERVANT WHO POURED WINE FOR US. JECONIAH BRIGHTENED UP A LITTLE AS WE TOOK OUR LEAVE. MAYBE IT WAS THE WINE.

OUR HONOR GUARD HAD WAITED OUTSIDE WHILE WE WENT INTO JECONIAH'S APARTMENT. THEY ACCOMPANIED US AS WE WENT TOWARD THE MAIN ENTRANCE, BUT BEFORE WE REACHED IT A MESSENGER MET US AND SAID WE WERE SUMMONED TO THE KING'S PRESENCE. I HAD NOTICED AS WE CAME TO THE PALACE THAT THE FLAG WAS FLYING THAT SIGNIFIED THAT THE KING WAS IN RESIDENCE.

THE HONOR GUARD AND THE MESSENGER ACCOMPANIED US TO THE THRONE ROOM, A VAST CHAMBER, WITH MAGNIFICENT FURNISHINGS AND DRAPERIES. THE KING WAS SEATED ON HIS THRONE, WITH HIS CROWN ON HIS HEAD, AND A SCEPTER IN HIS HAND. AT A SIGNAL FROM HIM, THE MESSENGER TOLD US TO GO FORWARD. WE ADVANCED AND KNELT BEFORE HIM.

NEBUCHADREZZAR LOOKED EVERY BIT A KING. HE WAS A LARGE, BROAD SHOULDERS MAN, WITH HAIR AND BEARD DRESSED ACCORDING TO THE LATEST STYLE. HE APPEARED TO BE ABOUT FORTY YEARS OLD. HE WAS DRESSED IN A ROBE OF THE FINEST MATERIAL, WITH AN INTRICATE PATTERN, WHICH, AS WE COULD SEE WHEN WE WERE NEAR ENOUGH, WAS OF LIONS IN GOLD. THE PREDOMINANT COLOR OF THE ROBE WAS PURPLE.

THE KING COMMANDED US TO RISE, THEN ROSE HIMSELF AND DESCENDED FROM THE THRONE. BIDDING US FOLLOW, HE LED THE WAY INTO A SMALL SITTING ROOM OFF THE GREAT HALL, DISMISSED ALL THE ATTENDANTS AND SHUT THE DOOR.

NEBUCHADREZZAR LAID ASIDE HIS CROWN AND SCEPTER, AND GAVE A GREAT SIGH OF RELIEF. HE EMBRACED HIS SON, SHOOK HANDS WARMLY WITH DANIEL, AND GAVE ME A CLAP ON THE SHOULDERS THAT MADE ME STAGGER. "NOW I CAN BE HUMAN FOR A LITTLE WHILE," HE SAID. "THE DIGNITY OF BEING A KING GETS BURDENSOME AT TIMES. AND HEARING PLEAS ALL DAY, AND MAKING DECISIONS, CAN WEAR A MAN OUT. YOU'LL HAVE TO TRY IT SOME DAY." HE GAVE A GREAT LAUGH, SAT DOWN IN AN EASY CHAIR, AND BADE US BE SEATED ALSO.

I WAS VERY MUCH EMBARRASSED TO BE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE GREAT KING, ESPECIALLY ON THIS FAMILIAR BASIS. HE CONVERSED WITH US FREELY, SPEAKING IN AKKADIAN AT FIRST, THEN SWITCHING TO ARAMAIC WHEN HE PERCEIVED THAT I WAS NOT YET FULLY FLUENT IN THAT LANGUAGE. HE WAS WELL INFORMED ABOUT WHAT WAS GOING ON, AND ASKED ABOUT OUR VISIT TO JECONIAH.

"HE SEEMED SO SAD AND DEPRESSED," EVIL-MARDUK SAID. "I FELT SORRY FOR HIM. IS IT NECESSARY TO BE SO SEVERE WITH THOSE CAPTIVE KINGS, FATHER?"

"YOUR COMPASSION DOES YOU CREDIT, SON," NEBUCHADREZZAR SAID, "BUT YOU HAVE A LOT TO LEARN. HAVE YOU EVER TRIED TO DRIVE EIGHT HORSES?"

"NO, FATHER, NEVER MORE THAN FOUR."

"WHEN I WAS NOT MUCH OLDER THAN YOU I COULD DRIVE SIXTEEN IN HAND. I MIGHT STILL BE ABLE TO DO IT, BUT IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME, I'M TOO BUSY FOR THAT SORT OF THING. BUT I'LL TELL YOU, IT WAS CHILD'S PLAY COMPARED TO MANAGING AN EMPIRE MADE UP OF FORTY DIFFERENT KINDS OF PEOPLE, ALL TRYING TO PULL DIFFERENT WAYS. JUST WHEN YOU THINK YOU HAVE GOT EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL, TROUBLE CAN BREAK OUT IN A NEW SPOT. WE'VE GOT TO BE RIGOROUS, THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT."

THE KING TURNED TO ME. "I'M INTERESTED IN YOUNG MEN," HE SAID. "I'VE HEARD SOME GOOD REPORTS ABOUT YOU. I HEAR YOU ARE STUDYING GREEK."

I ACKNOWLEDGED THAT I WAS.

"WELL, KEEP IT UP," HE SAID. "THOSE GREEKS ARE AN INTERESTING SET OF PEOPLE. I'VE HAD A FEW CONTACTS WITH THEM. SOME DAY I MAY WANT TO SEND AN AMBASSADOR OVER THERE -- SOME DAY, AFTER YOUR BEARD HAS GROWN," HE ADDED, LAUGHING. "HOW DO YOU LIKE IT OVER HERE?"

"I'M HAPPY HERE, YOUR MAJESTY," I SAID, "AND VERY GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO STUDY. I DO MISS MY FORMER HOME, AND MY MOTHER ESPECIALLY."

"THAT'S NATURAL," THE KING SAID. "BUT YOU'LL GET USED TO IT. I READ THE LETTER YOUR FATHER BROUGHT TO THE CAPTIVES. I ALWAYS SAID JEREMIAH WAS THE ONLY SANE MAN IN JERUSALEM, AND I'M MORE THAN EVER CONVINCED OF IT NOW."

"THEY GAVE HIM A PRETTY HARD TIME," I SAID.

"YES, I KNOW THEY DID. AND HE MAY GET WORSE TREATMENT YET. I'M AFRAID WE'RE STILL GOING TO HAVE TROUBLE OVER THERE. AND I'LL TELL YOU RIGHT NOW, IF THEY TRY TO REVOLT AGAINST ME AGAIN, THEY ARE REALLY GOING TO FIND OUT WHAT TROUBLE IS."

I SHUDDERED, THINKING ON MY MOTHER, AND BROTHER AND SISTER.

HE WENT ON, CONVERSING ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS WITH EASY FAMILIARITY. AT LAST THE KING STOOD UP, INDICATING THAT THE INTERVIEW WAS ENDED. WE STOOD ALSO. THE KING TAPPED A SMALL GONG, AND AN ATTENDANT ENTERED, WHO LED US TO WHERE OUR HONOR GUARD WAS WAITING. AS WE LEFT THE PALACE, DANIEL'S HONOR GUARD ACCOMPANIED HIM TO HIS PLACE. EVIL-MARDUK AND I TOOK A SHORT CUT TO THE UNIVERSITY.

AT THE UNIVERSITY, EVIL-MARDUK CAME WITH ME TO MY ROOM. IT WAS ALMOST THE HOUR OF SUNSET, AND AS THE HOUR ARRIVED I MADE MY EXCUSES, OPENED THE WINDOW TOWARD JERUSALEM, AND MADE MY PRAYER, USING A PRAYER I HAD MEMORIZED IN CHILDHOOD:

"YAHWEH IS THE PORTION OF MINE INHERITANCE AND OF MY CUP:
THOU MAINTAINEST MY LOT.

THE LINES ARE FALLEN UNTO ME IN PLEASANT PLACES:

YEA, I HAVE A GOODLY HERITAGE.

I WILL BLESS YAHWEH, WHO HATH GIVEN ME COUNSEL:

IN THE NIGHT THINE INWARD VOICE INSTRUCTETH ME.

I HAVE SET YAHWEH ALWAYS BEFORE ME:

BECAUSE HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND I SHALL NOT BE MOVED.

THEREFORE MY HEART IS GLAD, AND MY GLORY REJOICETH:

MY FLESH ALSO SHALL REST IN HOPE.

EVIL-MARDUK LISTENED RESPECTFULLY. AFTERWARD HE SAID, "I NOTICED THAT YOU DON'T SEEM TO HAVE ANY SORT OF IMAGE OF YOUR GOD. IS THAT?"

"WE ARE EXPRESSLY FORBIDDEN TO MAKE ANY SORT OF IMAGE, OR PICTURE, OR OTHER REPRESENTATION OF HIM," I EXPLAINED.

"THAT'S ODD," HE SAID. "I THOUGHT ALL THE GODS APPROVED OF IMAGES, THE MORE THE BETTER. OR MAYBE IT'S JUST THE PRIESTS. AFTER ALL, THE PRIESTS SELL THE IMAGES. MARDUK IS MY SPECIAL GOD, I HAVE A VERY NICE IMAGE OF HIM, BUT I OFFER SACRIFICES TO A LOT OF OTHER GODS TOO. I DON'T WANT ANY OF THEM TO TURN AGAINST ME. I TRY TO PLEASE THEM ALL."

"IN OUR RELIGION WE BELIEVE THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD, WHO CREATED THE WORLD, AND IS LORD OF EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE. WE DON'T KNOW WHAT HE LOOKS LIKE, AND WE ARE FORBIDDEN TO MAKE ANY SORT OF IMAGE, BUT WE WORSHIP HIM," I SAID.

"THAT IS A SOBERING THOUGHT," HE SAID. "MAYBE THERE IS REALLY ONLY ONE GOD, AND ALL THE OTHERS ARE JUST REPRESENTATIONS OF HIM. BUT I'LL BE ON THE SAFE SIDE, AND KEEP ON SACRIFICING TO THEM ALL."

EZEKIEL

MY INTERVIEW WITH NEGUCHADREZZAR CHANGED A LOT OF MY IDEAS. I WAS THRILLED AT HAVING BEEN PRIVILEGED EVEN TO COME INTO THE PRESENCE OF THE GREAT KING, AND TO BE SINGLED OUT FOR SPECIAL ATTENTION BY HIM WAS A WONDERFUL THING INDEED. BEFORE THAT, I HAD ALWAYS THOUGHT OF HIM AS AN ENEMY OF MY PEOPLE, TO WHOM WE HAD BEEN FORCED TO SUBMIT. EVEN THOUGH I KNEW THAT HE WAS THE FATHER OF MY FRIEND I HAD HATED HIM. BUT THIS INTERVIEW HAD GIVEN ME A NEW IDEA OF WHAT A KING MIGHT BE LIKE, AND I WAS FORCED TO ADMIRE HIM. TRULY HE WAS A GREAT KING. AND ALTHOUGH I STILL WISHED THAT MY NATION MIGHT BE INDEPENDENT I BEGAN TO SEE THAT WE HAD AN IMPORTANT DESTINY AS A PART OF THE MIGHTY EMPIRE OF BABEL. AND I BEGAN TO FEEL A SENSE OF LOYALTY TO THE KING, AND TO HIS GOVERNMENT, AND TO LOOK FORWARD WITH ANTICIPATION TO SERVING THAT GOVERNMENT IN THE DIPLOMATIC SERVICE. I WAS RESOLVED TO WORK HARDER THAN EVER AT MY STUDIES.

I LEARNED THAT THERE WOULD BE TWO WEEKS OF HOLIDAYS AT THE TIME OF THE SOLSTICE, WHICH TO THE AKKADIANS MARKED THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW YEAR. I RESOLVED TO VISIT MY FAMILY IN CHENAR FOR THE HOLIDAYS.

BUT SHORTLY BEFORE THAT DATE ARRIVED, EVIL-MARDUK CAME TO ME WITH AN INTERESTING PIECE OF NEWS. HE WAS TO BE MARRIED.

"MARRIED?" I SAID. "AND YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE A BEARD?"

"I HAVE MORE THAN YOU THINK," HE SAID. "ONLY IT DOESN'T SHOW BECAUSE IT IS BLOND. I AM SEVENTEEN ALREADY. IT IS TIME FOR ME TO HAVE A WIFE."

AND WHEN I LOOKED CLOSELY I SAW THAT HE DID HAVE AS MUCH BEARD AS I, THOUGH MINE, BEING DARK, WAS MORE VISIBLE -- AND STILL NOT ANYTHING TO BRAG ABOUT.

"WHEN IS THE WEDDING TO BE?" I ASKED. "AND WHO IS THE LUCKY GIRL?"

"IT WILL BE DURING THE HOLIDAYS," HE SAID. "MY BRIDE'S NAME IS ISHTAR-SHU-TU-A, AND SHE LIVES IN CHENAR. I HAVE NEVER MET HER; MY FATHER AND HER PARENTS MADE THE ARRANGEMENTS. BUT SHE IS SAID TO BE VERY BEAUTIFUL, AND SHE IS OF A VERY DISTINGUISHED FAMILY, BEING A GREAT GRANDDAUGHTER OF THE FAMOUS KING ASSHUR-BANI-APLIL. I WILL BE LEAVING FOR CHENAR RIGHT AFTER SCHOOL IS OUT FOR THE HOLIDAYS."

"AND WHERE WILL YOU LIVE AFTER YOU ARE MARRIED? SURELY YOU WON'T BRING YOUR WIFE INTO THE UNIVERSITY QUARTERS."

"I SHOULD SAY NOT. THEY ARE ARRANGING A HOUSE FOR US, NOT FAR FROM HERE, AND SERVANTS, AND EVERYTHING. I'LL MISS THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE MEN HERE, BUT IT WILL BE GREAT TO BE MARRIED. AND I'LL BE COMING BACK FOR CLASSES, OF COURSE."

I WISHED HIM MUCH HAPPINESS, AND THOUGHT LONGINGLY THAT MAYBE SOME DAY MY TURN WOULD COME TOO. BUT I CERTAINLY COULD NOT MAINTAIN A WIFE ON MY MEAGER ALLOWANCE, WHICH BARELY SUFFICED FOR CLOTHES FOR ME.

ALL THE STUDENTS LOOKED FORWARD EAGERLY FOR THE HOLIDAYS, WHICH WOULD BE A TIME OF FEASTING, AND VISITING FAMILY AND FRIENDS. WHEN THE DAY CAME I SET OUT JAUNTILY FOR THE THREE DAY WALK. I WAS FORTUNATE TO HAVE GOOD WEATHER; AT THAT TIME OF YEAR THE WEATHER CAN BE VERY DISAGREEABLE.

I HAD HAD NO NEWS AT ALL FROM MY FATHER THESE THREE MONTHS, AND I WAS IN FOR A SURPRISE — SEVERAL SURPRISES, IN FACT. THE TOWN OF CHESAR HAD A LOT OF NEW BUILDINGS; I HAD TO STOP AND THINK TO FIND MY FATHER'S HOUSE. BEFORE I REACHED IT I MET TAMAR, COMING FROM THE WELL, A PITCHER OF WATER ON HER HEAD. I WAS SURPRISED TO SEE HOW MUCH SHE HAD GROWN.

WE COULD NOT GIVE A PROPER GREETING, ON ACCOUNT OF THE JAR OF WATER. I COMMENTED ON HER GROWTH, AND SHE SAID THAT I HAD GROWN TOO. AND I GUESS I HAD, WHEN I CAME TO THINK OF IT. WE CAME TO THE SHOP. FATHER WAS JUST PUTTING UP THE OUTSIDE SHUTTERS, CLOSING THE SHOP FOR THE NIGHT. HE HAD NOT BEEN EXPECTING ME, BUT WAS GLAD TO SEE ME. WE WENT INSIDE. I SAW THAT THE SHOP WAS MUCH MORE COMPLETE THAN IT HAD BEEN WHEN I WENT AWAY. AS WE WENT INTO THE LIVING QUARTERS I HAD ANOTHER SURPRISE — A WOMAN MET US.

"JO-ZADAK, THIS IS YOUR NEW STEP-MOTHER, HAMUTAL," FATHER SAID. I WAS SHOCKED. SOMEHOW IT HAD NOT EVEN OCCURRED TO ME THAT MY FATHER MIGHT MARRY AGAIN. I GREETED HER AS WARMLY AS I COULD.

APPARENTLY SHE HAD BEEN A WIDOW, FOR TWO LITTLE BOYS CAME DASHING IN, WHO WERE INTRODUCED AS ELON AND DODO. THEY LOOKED TO BE ABOUT EIGHT YEARS OLD AND SIX, RESPECTIVELY. THEY GREETED ME TIMIDLY.

IT WAS ALMOST TIME FOR THE EVENING MEAL. TAMAR WAS SCURRYING AROUND, HELPING HER STEP-MOTHER PUT THE FOOD ON THE TABLE AND GET EVERYTHING READY. MY FATHER SAID THE RITUAL PRAYERS, AND WE SAT DOWN TO EAT. THERE WAS BREAD AND HONEY, CHEESE AND DATES, AND MILK. IT WAS ALL VERY GOOD AND SATISFYING. I HAD NOT EXPECTED MEAT, KNOWING THAT SIMPLE PEOPLE HAD MEAT ONLY ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS. BESIDES, I HAD BEEN WITHOUT MEAT SO LONG THAT I HARDLY MISSED IT.

AFTER SUPPER WE CONVERSED FOR A LONG TIME. THEY HAD MUCH TO TELL ME OF HAPPENINGS AT CHESAR, AND I WAS EAGER TO TELL ABOUT MY LIFE IN THE CAPITAL. TAMAR WAS ESPECIALLY INTERESTED TO HEAR OF MY EXPERIENCES. THE LITTLE BOYS WERE SOON SLEEPY AND WERE PACKED OFF TO BED, BUT TAMAR WAS ALL EARS. I TRIED TO DESCRIBE THE UNIVERSITY, AND THE PALACE, AND OTHER MAGNIFICENT BUILDINGS.

"HOW LONG IS YOUR COURSE OF STUDY?" FATHER ASKED.

I EXPLAINED THAT IT WAS THREE YEARS, THAT MY APPOINTMENT WOULD BE RENEWED EACH YEAR, DEPENDING ON MY WORK BEING SATISFACTORY.

"THEN AFTER THAT," I SAID, "THERE ARE COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS FOR A TWO YEAR COURSE OF GRADUATE STUDIES. IF I AM LUCKY ENOUGH TO GET THAT APPOINTMENT IT WILL CARRY A PRETTY GOOD SALARY."

"UNLESS WE HAVE ALL GONE HOME TO JERUSALEM BY THAT TIME," MY STEP-MOTHER SAID.

I LAUGHED AT THAT, THINKING OF IT AS SIMPLY A WILD DREAM, AND SHE WAS ANGRY. I LEARNED THAT THERE WERE SOME MEN CLAIMING TO BE PROPHETS WHO WERE TELLING THE PEOPLE THAT THEY HAD A REVELATION FROM YAHWEH THAT OUR PEOPLE WERE TO BE SENT HOME VERY SOON.

"THEN WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT JEREMIAH'S WORD, IN THE LETTER, THAT AFTER SEVENTY YEARS GOD WOULD REDEEM HIS PEOPLE?" I ASKED.

"JEREMIAH?" SHE SAID SCORNFULLY. "WHAT DOES HE KNOW?"

I TOLD THEM ABOUT MY FRIENDSHIP WITH EVEL-MARON, AND ABOUT THE VISIT WE HAD HAD WITH THE KING.

"DO YOU MEAN THAT YOU HAVE ACTUALLY SEEN NEDUCHADREZZAR, FACE TO FACE?" MY FATHER SAID, INCREDULOUS.

"NOT ONLY THAT, HE CLAPPED ME ON THE BACK AND SAID THAT HE HAD HEARD ABOUT MY WORK, AND PROMISED TO MAKE ME AN AMBASSADOR SOME DAY." I WAS BOASTFUL, BUT FELT THAT I HAD A RIGHT TO BE.

"NEDUCHADREZZAR?" MY STEP-MOTHER SAID. "THAT CRUEL TYRANT?"

"HE MAY BE A TYRANT, BUT WE ARE A PART OF HIS EMPIRE, AND HE IS OUR KING," I SAID. "AND HE REALLY IS A GREAT KING."

"NOT MY KING," SHE SAID.

THE NEXT DAY, WHEN I HAD OPPORTUNITY TO TALK TO MY FATHER IN PRIVATE, I MENTIONED HIS REMARRIAGE. IT WAS NOT FOR ME TO REPROACH HIM, BUT I WAS THINKING ABOUT MOTHER.

"I CAN UNDERSTAND HOW YOU FEEL," HE SAID, "AND I FEEL THAT TOO. I WILL NEVER LOVE ANOTHER WOMAN AS I LOVED YOUR MOTHER. BUT LET'S BE REALISTIC ABOUT THINGS. IT IS VERY UNLIKELY THAT I SHALL EVER SEE HER AGAIN, AND IT IS HARD FOR A MAN TO LIVE WITHOUT A WIFE. HAMUTAL NEEDED A HUSBAND, AND I NEEDED A WIFE, AND THERE IT WAS."

I MUST HAVE SHOWN THAT I DID NOT THINK MUCH OF HIS CHOICE, FOR HE WENT ON: "TRY TO BE PATIENT WITH HER. SHE IS VERY BITTER. HER HUSBAND DIED ON THE LONG MARCH. SHE BEGGED THE GUARDS TO GIVE THEM A DAY TO REST, AND THEY ONLY LAUGHED AT HER. IT IS NO WONDER SHE LISTENS TO THOSE PROPHETS — FALSE PROPHETS, I AM SURE THEY ARE — WHO TALK ABOUT GETTING SUPPORT FROM EGYPT, AND BEING RESTORED TO OUR COUNTRY."

"AND IF YOU EVER DO SEE MOTHER AGAIN?"

"IF I DO, SHE WILL STILL BE MY WIFE. THERE IS NOTHING IN THE LAW TO SAY THAT I CAN'T HAVE TWO WIVES AT THE SAME TIME."

"NOT THOSE TWO, NOT IN ANY SORT OF PEACE, I THOUGHT, BUT DID NOT SAY IT."

THE NEXT DAY I WENT TO VISIT ELASA — OR MAYBE IT WAS JERUSHA I WANTED TO VISIT. ELASA HAD ALSO REMARRIED, BUT NOT A WIDOW; HE HAD MARRIED A YOUNG GIRL, AND THEY SEEMED VERY HAPPY TOGETHER.

JERUSHA HAD GROWN QUITE A BIT DURING THE PAST MONTHS, AND WAS GETTING TO BE A VERY PRETTY GIRL. I HUGGED HER AND KISSED HER AS I HAD OFTEN DONE BEFORE, BUT IT MEANT MORE TO ME THIS TIME — AND TO HER, TOO, I THOUGHT. SHE WAS THIRTEEN, LOTS OF GIRLS WERE GETTING MARRIED BY THAT AGE. AND I WAS NEARLY SEVENTEEN. BUT I COULD NOT THINK OF TRYING TO GET MARRIED ON MY MEAGER ALLOWANCE.

BUT I DID SPEAK TO ELASA ABOUT IT. "IF JERUSHA CAN WAIT TWO OR THREE YEARS," I SAID, "I HOPE BY THAT TIME I WILL BE IN A POSITION TO GET MARRIED."

"SHE'S YOUNG YET," HE SAID. "AND I KNOW SHE LIKES YOU. MEANWHILE, I AM TEACHING HER TO READ AND WRITE — AND TAMAR, TOO. THEY ARE GETTING TO BE QUITE GOOD AT IT, AND ARE ALREADY HELPING ME IN MY WORK."

I WAS NOT FOND OF MY STEP-MOTHER, AND I SPENT MOST OF MY HOLIDAY TIME WITH ELASA, AND JERUSHA, AND TAMAR. HOGLAH, ELASA'S WIFE, WAS VERY AGREEABLE COMPANY TOO.

I SPENT A GOOD DEAL OF TIME WITH EZEKIEL, TOO. HE WAS A PRIEST BY BIRTH, BUT HAD NEVER BEEN INDUCTED INTO THE PRIESTHOOD BECAUSE HE WAS NOT YET THIRTY YEARS OLD. AND OF COURSE THERE WAS NOBODY TO INDUCT HIM HERE. BUT HE SEEMED TO FEEL THAT HE WAS APPOINTED TO BE A SPIRITUAL ADVISER TO ALL THE ISRAELITE EXILES. HE WAS "GATHERING UP THE STRAYS," AS HE EXPRESSED IT, ENCOURAGING THE PEOPLE TO OBSERVE THE LAW, AND KEEP UP THEIR HOPE IN YAHWEH.

"SOME OF OUR PEOPLE," HE TOLD ME, "ARE SAYING, 'NOW THAT WE ARE IN AKKAD, WE MIGHT AS WELL DO AS THE AKKADIANS DO, AND WORSHIP THEIR GODS.' I KEEP TELLING THEM THAT, NO MATTER WHERE WE ARE, WE ARE STILL YAHWEH'S PEOPLE, AND WE MUST BE FAITHFUL TO HIS LAW. SOMETIMES I THINK I'M ACCOMPLISHING SOMETHING WITH THEM, AND SOMETIMES I WONDER. BUT I KEEP TRYING, I THINK THAT IS WHAT YAHWEH WANTS ME TO DO."

"WHAT ABOUT THOSE SELF STYLED PROPHETS I HEAR PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT?" I ASKED.

"THEY ARE A THORN IN MY SIDE," HE SAID. "HAB, ZEDEKIAH AND SHEMAIAH HAVE STIRRED UP A LOT OF TROUBLE, CLAIMING TO HAVE A REVELATION FROM YAHWEH, AND I AM SURE THAT YAHWEH HAS NOT SPOKEN TO THEM AT ALL. YOU MAY REMEMBER, THEY WROTE A LETTER TO THAT SO-CALLED HIGH PRIEST ZEPHANIAH, IN JERUSALEM. IT WAS THEIR LETTER, IN PART, THAT PROVOKED JEREMIAH TO WRITE THE LETTER YOUR FATHER BROUGHT. THEY WANT OUR PEOPLE TO PLAY POLITICS WITH EGYPT, AND NOTHING BUT TROUBLE CAN EVER COME OF THAT. MAY YAHWEH CURSE THEM!"

ANYWAY, EZEKIEL WAS TRYING. ON THE SABBATH DAY HE HAD A GOOD NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO MET IN FRONT OF HIS HOUSE, AND HE READ TO THEM FROM THE LAW, AND LED THEM IN SAYING PRAYERS. AND HE HAD BEEN TEACHING THEM TO SING SOME OF THE SONGS OF ZION.

"HOW CAN WE SING YAHWEH'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND?" SOME OF THEM SAID. BUT EZEKIEL HAD A GOOD VOICE, AND HE HAD THEM SINGING, IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT THE WEATHER WAS COLD, AND IT WAS BEGINNING TO RAIN. I SANG WITH THEM TOO, AND IT DID MY HEART GOOD.

NERGAL SHAREZER

IT WAS MORE THAN TWO YEARS BEFORE I SAW MY FAMILY AGAIN. BACK IN THE CAPITAL I WORKED HARD AT MY STUDIES, AND MY TEACHERS SEEMED PLEASED WITH MY PROGRESS. I SAW EVIL-MAROUK NOW AND THEN AT THE UNIVERSITY, BUT OUR FORMER COMPANIONSHIP WAS ALMOST FORGOTTEN; HE HAD OTHER INTERESTS. I WAS MAKING OTHER FRIENDS, SOME AMONG THE ISRAELITES AND SOME AMONG THE AKKADIANS. IN A WHILE I WAS INVITED TO DANIEL'S HOME FOR A SABBATH MEAL, AND CAME TO BE VERY FOND OF LITTLE ISATAH, WHO SHOWED REMARKABLE PERSPICACITY FOR SUCH A YOUNG CHILD. FOR MY FIRST PASSOVER FEAST IN BAB-EL I WAS A GUEST IN THE HOME OF SAMUEL BEN JEPHTA, A MERCHANT IN THE CITY. AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL TERM SAMUEL OFFERED ME EMPLOYMENT FOR THE LONG VACATION, AND LODGING IN HIS HOME, WHICH I WAS GLAD TO ACCEPT.

BUSY AS I WAS, THE TIME SEEMED TO FLY. SAMUEL HAD A CARAVAN OF MERCHANDISE GOING TO CHEDAR. I TOOK ADVANTAGE OF IT TO SEND A LETTER TO MY FATHER, ASSURING HIM OF MY WELFARE, AND ANOTHER TO JERUSHA, ASSURING HER OF MY LOVE.

WHEN CLASSES RESUMED I MOVED BACK INTO MY OLD QUARTERS, AND HAD THE SATISFACTION OF BEING ABLE TO LEND IT OVER THE NEW STUDENTS. I HAD MATURED SOME, TOO. MY BEARD WAS NOT FULLY DEVELOPED, BUT WAS VERY MUCH IN EVIDENCE. WE BEGAN THE SERIOUS STUDY OF SUMERIAN, AND THE VARIOUS OTHER ANCIENT SCRIPTS, EBLAHITE, HITTITE AND HURRIAN, AND OTHERS. OF MODERN LANGUAGES WE STUDIED PERSIAN, BESIDES EGYPTIAN AND GREEK. THE PERSIANS WROTE THEIR LANGUAGE IN CUNEIFORM CHARACTERS, DIFFERENT FROM THE ONES WE WERE FAMILIAR WITH. WE READ MUCH OF THE ANCIENT LITERATURE OF THE AKKADIANS AND SUMERIANS, INCLUDING THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH, UT-NAPISHTUM, AND THE GREAT FLOOD, SOMEWHAT SIMILAR TO THE STORY OF NOAH IN OUR ANCIENT BOOKS.

I HAD PLANNED TO VISIT MY FAMILY AGAIN AT THE TIME OF THE WINTER HOLIDAYS, BUT DECIDED TO LEAVE THAT OFF WHEN I WAS INVITED TO A FEAST AT THE HOME OF EVIL-MAROUK, WHICH FELL RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HOLIDAY PERIOD. THE FEAST WAS TO CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF HIS SON. IT WAS QUITE A CARA AFFAIR, WITH MANY NOBILITY PRESENT, INCLUDING NARAM BEL, THE CROWN PRINCE, EVIL-MAROUK'S ELDEST BROTHER. THE KING WAS AWAY, ON A MILITARY CAMPAIGN SOMEWHERE. THE HIGH PRIEST OF NERGAL WAS THERE, DRESSED IN SOME VERY FANCY ROBES. HE WAS THE ONE WHO SOLEMNLY BESTOWED THE NAME ON THE LITTLE PRINCE, NERGAL-SHAREZER. AS I WATCHED THE CEREMONIES I WONDERED IF THIS LITTLE BABY WOULD EVER GROW UP TO BE THE RULER OF THE MIGHTY EMPIRE OF BAD-EL.

SAMUEL OFFERED ME EMPLOYMENT AGAIN FOR THE LONG VACATION, AND I WAS GLAD TO ACCEPT IT. SOON IT WAS TIME FOR CLASSES TO BEGIN AGAIN. ASTRONOMY AND ASTROLOGY WERE INCLUDED IN THE COURSE THAT YEAR. ASTRONOMY I FOUND INTERESTING; I DID NOT CARE FOR ASTROLOGY, BUT I LEARNED ENOUGH OF THEIR JARGON TO PASS THE COURSE. WE WORKED HARD ON PERSIAN THAT YEAR, AND IN ADDITION TO THE CLASS WORK I SPENT MUCH TIME WITH THE SON OF THE PERSIAN AMBASSADOR, WHO WAS ENROLLED AS A FIRST YEAR STUDENT. HE INVITED ME TO SPEND THE WINTER HOLIDAYS IN HIS HOME, AND I ACCEPTED, GLAD OF AN OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE MY SPEAKING KNOWLEDGE OF THAT DIFFICULT LANGUAGE.

AT THE END OF THE THIRD YEAR I SAT FOR THE COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS, AND WHEN THE LIST OF APPOINTMENTS FOR THE TWO YEAR GRADUATE COURSE WAS POSTED I WAS THRILLED TO SEE MY NAME AMONG THE TOP TEN. WITH THE LARGER STIPEND THAT WOULD ACCOMPANY THIS APPOINTMENT I COULD NOW THINK SERIOUSLY OF MARRIAGE.

CONFIDENT OF THIS SUCCESS, I HAD ALREADY SENT A LETTER TO ELASA, REQUESTING THAT A DATE IN EARLY SUMMER BE SET FOR THE WEDDING. AND HAD RECEIVED HIS REPLY. I TOLD EVIL-MAROUK OF MY PLANS.

EVIL-MAROUK WAS ENTHUSIASTIC. "YOU OUGHT TO DO THAT THING IN STYLE," HE SAID. "I TELL YOU WHAT -- YOU MUST TAKE MY CHARIOT AND HORSES -- AND MY DRIVER, TOO."

"OH, I COULDN'T THINK OF DOING THAT," I SAID, DUMFOUNDED.

"OH YES YOU CAN," HE SAID. "I INSIST ON IT. THAT WILL BE MY WEDDING GIFT TO YOU. YOU MUST SHOW THOSE YOKELS DOWN THERE IN CHEDAR THAT YOU ARE GETTING UP IN THE WORLD."

I TRIED HALF HEARTEDLY TO ARGUE, BUT HE WOULD NOT LISTEN. AND SO IT HAPPENED THAT I RODE INTO CHEBAR IN A CHARIOT, AND DRESSED IN NEW CLOTHES, TO THE AMAZEMENT OF ALL. TAMAR WAS ESPECIALLY IMPRESSED. I TOOK HER FOR A RIDE IN THE HANDSOME VEHICLE, AND ALL HER FRIENDS CAME OUT INTO THE STREET TO SEE US GO BY. TAMAR WAVED AT THEM, HER FACE FLUSHED WITH TRIUMPH.

"AND WHAT ABOUT YOU, SISTER," I SAID. "NO WEDDING PLANS FOR YOU?"

"FATHER WANTED TO ARRANGE A MARRIAGE FOR ME LAST YEAR, WITH A YOUNG FELLOW HERE. HE IS A PRETTY GOOD SORT, I THINK I MIGHT HAVE A HAPPY LIFE WITH HIM, BUT YOU KNOW I PROMISED HANANI, AND I STILL BELIEVE HE WILL COME BACK FOR ME."

I HAD ALMOST FORGOTTEN HANANI; SO MANY THINGS HAD HAPPENED. "HANANI? SURELY HE MUST BE DEAD BY NOW."

"THAT'S WHAT FATHER SAYS," SHE ANSWERED. "BUT I BELIEVE IF HE WERE DEAD I WOULD FEEL IT. I BELIEVE HE IS ALIVE, AND THAT HE WILL COME FOR ME ONE OF THESE DAYS."

"AND HOW DOES THE OLD MAN REACT TO THAT?"

"HE TRIED TO INSIST LAST YEAR. I COULDN'T REFUSE OUTRIGHT, BUT I BEGAN TO TELL HIM TO LET ME WAIT. WE FINALLY REACHED AN AGREEMENT THAT I BE ALLOWED TO WAIT UNTIL MY BIRTHDAY SIXTEEN, AND THEN IF THERE IS NO MORE NEWS OF HANANI I WILL MARRY THE OTHER MAN. THAT IS ONLY A LITTLE OVER THREE MONTHS NOW, I SURE WISH HANANI WOULD GET HERE. I PRAY EVERY NIGHT FOR HIM TO COME."

"HOW ARE YOU AND HAMUTAL GETTING ALONG?" I ASKED. "AND THE BABY SISTER?"

"THE BABY IS PRECIOUS," SHE SAID. "SHE'S JUST STARTED WALKING. STEP-MOTHER AND I GET ALONG PRETTY WELL. I THINK SHE WOULD BE GLAD TO HAVE ME OUT OF THE PLACE, BUT IN THE MEANTIME I'M PRETTY USEFUL. I'M GOOD AT SPINNING AND WEAVING. AND BESIDES, I'VE BEEN MAKING A LOT OF THINGS FOR MY HOPE CHEST. ANY TIME THAT HANANI SHOWS UP, I'M READY TO DROP EVERYTHING AND GO."

IT WAS FOUR DAYS BEFORE MY WEDDING DAY. I WAS CRAZY TO SEE JERUSHA, BUT EVERYBODY SAID I MUST NOT SEE HER UNTIL THE WEDDING ITSELF -- THAT IT WAS NOT PROPER. I THOUGHT IT WAS A SILLY IDEA, BUT TRIED TO BE PATIENT.

I SPENT MUCH TIME WITH FATHER. HE TOLD ME ABOUT EZEKIEL'S VISION. "IT HAPPENED ON THE DAY OF THE BIG SANDSTORM," HE SAID. "WE ALL SAW THE CLOUD, BUT ONE OF THE WORST ANY OF US HAD EVER SEEN, AND WE TOOK COVER AS WE COULD. BUT IT SEEMS EZEKIEL WAS RIGHT OUT IN IT ALL, AND HE MUST HAVE BEEN SOMETHING. THE REST OF US DIDN'T SEE. HE TRIED TO DESCRIBE IT TO ME, BUT I COULDN'T MAKE MUCH SENSE OF IT, WHEELS, AND LIGHTS, AND SUCH. 'AND YAHWEH SPOKE TO ME,' HE SAID, 'SPOKE RIGHT OUT, I COULD HEAR HIM AS PLAIN AS YOU CAN HEAR ME.' THAT WAS THE WAY HE TOLD IT. HE SAID YAHWEH WAS CALLING HIM TO BE A PROPHET."

"WHAT DID HE DO -- FAINT AWAY?"

"NO, HE CAME BACK HOME, THEY SAID THEY KNEW SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED TO HIM BY THE LOOK ON HIS FACE, BUT FOR A LONG TIME HE WOULDN'T SAY A WORD. THEN HE STARTED DOING SOME STRANGE THINGS -- BUT NOT LIKE HE WAS CRAZY, I UNDERSTAND, BUT LIKE IT MEANT SOMETHING. HE SHAVED OFF ALL HIS HAIR AND BEARD, AND CALLED THE ELDERS TO WATCH WHAT HE DID WITH THE HAIR. PART OF IT

HE CURLED, PART HE CUT UP FINE AND THREW IT INTO THE WIND, AND SAID: 'IT WAS A SIGN OF WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IN JERUSALEM -- FIRE AND SWORD AND BANISHMENT. IT WOULD BE GOD'S PUNISHMENT FOR THE SIN AND DISOBEDIENCE OF THE NATION.'

"I WANT TO GO AND SEE HIM," I SAID.

"YOU DO THAT," FATHER SAID. "YOU'LL BE IMPRESSED. I THINK HE REALLY IS A PROPHET."

I DID GO TO EZEKIEL'S HOME LATE THAT AFTERNOON. THE WEATHER WAS MILD, HE WAS LYING ON A PALLET IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE, AND TWELVE ELDERS WERE SEATED ON THE GROUND IN FRONT OF HIM. ADI, HIS WIFE, WAS PREPARING HIS SUPPER. SHE SHOWED ME HOW IT MUST BE DONE. "IT WAS GOD'S ORDERS TO HIM," SHE SAID, "AND IT HAS TO BE DONE JUST SO -- SO MUCH WHEAT, SO MUCH BARLEY, SO MUCH MILLET, AND OTHER THINGS, ALL MEASURED AND WEIGHED. THAT'S ALL HE EATS, JUST ONCE A DAY. I DON'T SEE HOW HE CAN STAY ALIVE ON IT."

SHE MIXED THE GRAINS, GRIND THEM IN A MORTAR, AND ADDED ENOUGH WATER TO MAKE THEM INTO A LITTLE CAKE, WHICH SHE PUT TO BAKE, OVER A LITTLE FIRE OF DRIED COW DUNG.

EZEKIEL WAS LYING ON HIS LEFT SIDE. BEFORE HIM WAS A CLAY TILE, ON WHICH HE HAD DRAWN WITH A STYLUS A RECOGNIZABLE PICTURE OF THE CITY OF JERUSALEM. CERTAIN FEATURES OF THE WALLS, WELL REMEMBERED BY ALL OF US, MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO MISS THE SIGNIFICANCE. AND LINES DRAWN AROUND THIS CLEARLY INDICATED THE EARTHWORKS CAST UP BY A BESIEGING FORCE.

"IT IS COMING!" HE TOLD THE ELDERS. "OUR CITY IS GOING TO BE BESIEGED, TAKEN, AND DESTROYED. YOU KEEP TALKING ABOUT GOING BACK. SOME MEN CLAIMING TO BE PROPHETS HAVE ASSURED YOU YOU WOULD GO BACK, AND SOON. BUT YOU JUST WAIT AND SEE. YOU ARE NOT GOING BACK. JERUSALEM IS GOING TO BE DESTROYED. THIS WILL BE THE END OF OUR BELOVED CITY."

THE ELDERS LISTENED, DUMB WITH AMAZEMENT.

WHEN THE CAKE WAS READY, ADI TOOK IT UP AND BROUGHT IT TO HIM. AND SHE CAREFULLY MEASURED OUT A MEAGER PORTION OF WATER FOR HIM TO DRINK WITH IT. EZEKIEL ATE AND DRANK BEFORE THE ELDERS. "THIS IS A SIGN," HE SAID. "YOU SEE HOW MY FOOD AND WATER ARE RATIONED OUT SO CAREFULLY? IN THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM THE RATIONING IS GOING TO BE EVEN MORE SEVERE THAN THIS. IT IS COMING! YAHWEH IS BRINGING THIS PUNISHMENT ON OUR NATION FOR ALL OUR SINS."

WHEN THE ELDERS HAD GONE, EZEKIEL TALKED WITH ME. HE TOLD ME BRIEFLY OF HIS VISION. "YAHWEH SPOKE TO ME," HE SAID. "HE TOLD ME, 'YOU ARE TO GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND GIVE THEM MY WORDS, WHETHER THEY WILL LISTEN OR NOT. THEY ARE A REBELLIOUS PEOPLE. BUT WHETHER THEY WILL HEAR, OR REFUSE TO HEAR, THEY SHALL KNOW THERE HAS BEEN A PROPHET AMONG THEM.'"

I ASKED ADI HOW THEY WERE MANAGING TO LIVE.

"WE ARE MANAGING," SHE SAID. "THE CROP WAS ALREADY HARVESTED BEFORE HE HAD THE VISION, AND WE HAVE GRAIN TO SELL. BIDKAR IS A BIG HELP. WE HAVE OUR VEGETABLE PLOT, AND A COW, AND WE WILL SURVIVE -- I HOPE."

I HOPED SO TOO, AND TOLD HER SO.

THE DAYS PASSED. THEN, ON THE EVENING BEFORE THE WEDDING DAY, A STRANGER APPEARED IN CHEBAR, RIDING A CAMEL. A CROWD GATHERED AROUND HIM IN THE STREET. HE WAS SPEAKING IN HEBREW, AND ASKING FOR MY FATHER'S HOUSE. I HAD TO TAKE A SECOND LOOK BEFORE I RECOGNIZED HIM. "HANANI!" I CRIED.

IT WAS, INDEED. HE HAD GROWN A LOT, AND WAS ALMOST A HEAD TALLER THAN I, AND WAS BRONZED BY THE SUN.

"TAMAR!" I CALLED AS WE NEARED THE HOUSE. "TAMAR, GUESS WHO IS HERE!"

HER FACE LIT UP AS SHE CAME TO THE DOOR. "HE'S COME!" SHE CRIED. "I KNEW HE WOULD COME!" AND SHE RUSHED INTO HIS ARMS.

IT WAS A HAPPY REUNION INDEED. WE HAD MUCH TO TALK OF OUR ADVENTURES. HANANI SAID HE HAD INDEED JOINED THE BEDOU, HAD LIVED WITH THEM FOR A YEAR, THEN GONE WITH A CARAVAN AWAY UP INTO ARMENIA, AND HAD GOT A JOB AS MANAGER OF A CATTLE RANCH, OUT ON THE VERY FRONTIER OF THE EMPIRE. "AND YOU KNOW WHAT?" HE SAID, "I FOUND SOME OF OUR PEOPLE UP THERE — DANITES, OF ALL THINGS. THEY SAID THEIR ANCESTORS HAD MIGRATED UP THERE AWAY BACK WHEN SHAL-MANESER'S ARMIES WERE OVERRUNNING THEIR COUNTRY. THERE ARE ABOUT A DOZEN FAMILIES OF THEM UP THERE NOW."

"NOT THE FIRST TIME DANITES HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO MIGRATE," I SAID, REMEMBERING THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT TIMES AMONG OUR PEOPLE.

"THE RANCH BELONGS TO A CHIEF OF A TRIBE UP THAT WAY," HANANI SAID. "I STAND IN PRETTY WELL WITH HIM. HE GAVE ME TIME OFF TO MAKE THIS TRIP. A COUPLE OF THE DANITES ARE TAKING OVER MY DUTIES WHILE I'M AWAY."

I TOLD HIM THAT THE NEXT DAY WAS MY WEDDING DAY.

"FUNNY," HE SAID. "I DREAMED OF YOU A WHILE BACK, AND THAT'S WHAT MADE ME DECIDE TO MAKE THE TRIP THIS YEAR. NOW LET'S MAKE IT A DOUBLE WEDDING."

FATHER AGREED, OF COURSE, AND PLANS WERE SET IN MOTION.

"I'LL HAVE TO WARN YOU, THOUGH," HE SAID WITH HIS ARM AROUND TAMAR. "IT WILL BE A PRETTY ROUGH LIFE UP THERE."

"I'M NOT AFRAID," TAMAR SAID.

HANANI FOUND A SALE FOR HIS CAMEL, THE WEDDING CEREMONIES WERE PROPERLY GONE THROUGH, AND ON THE DAY AFTER WE ALL CROWDED OURSELVES INTO EVIL-MARDUK'S CHARIOT AND SET OUT FOR BAG-ILU. I HAD RENTED AN APARTMENT, WHICH WAS READY FOR US. FATHER HAD PROVIDED WEDDING RINGS AND OTHER JEWELRY FOR THE BRIDES, AND ELASA LOADED US DOWN WITH PORTIONS OF THE HOLY BOOKS.

HANANI AND TAMAR STAYED TWO DAYS WITH US IN BAG-ILU. HANANI BOUGHT TWO RIDING MULES AND A PACK ASS, AND THEY SET OUT JAUNTILY FOR THEIR FAR DISTANT HOME.

YESHUA

TWO YEARS WENT BY. MY STUDIES WERE INTENSIFIED, BUT IN THE EVENINGS, INSTEAD OF GOING TO A LONELY ROOM AT THE UNIVERSITY I WENT HOME TO A COMFORTABLE APARTMENT AND A LOVING WIFE. MY STIPEND, ALTHOUGH NOT MUNIFICENT, WAS SUFFICIENT FOR US TO LIVE IN REASONABLE COMFORT. WE HAD EACH OTHER, AND AS TIME WENT ON OUR CIRCLE OF FRIENDS WIDENED.

EACH SABBATH EVE, GROUPS OF ISRAELITES WOULD GATHER AND TALK ABOUT THE HOME LAND, READ FROM THE TORAH, AND JOIN IN RITUAL PRAYERS, ALWAYS IMPLORING YAHWEH TO RESTORE THE FORTUNES OF OUR NATION. OFTEN WE WOULD SING SOME OF THE SONGS OF ZION. WE WERE NOT EXACTLY HOMESICK; WE HAD BEEN IN SHINAR LONG ENOUGH THAT IT SEEMED HOME TO US, BUT STILL WE THOUGHT OF THAT OTHER HOME, AND MANY A TEAR WAS SHED, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE THOUGHT OF EZEKIEL'S GRIM PREDICTIONS ABOUT DESTRUCTION IMPENDING. WE THOUGHT, TOO, OF JEREMIAH'S PROMISE OF RETURN AFTER SEVENTY YEARS, BUT THAT SEEMED AN INCREDIBLE DISTANCE IN THE FUTURE.

WE KEPT DISCOVERING ISRAELITES IN BAD-EL -- MORE THAN WE HAD THOUGHT POSSIBLE. MANY ACQUAINTANCES WHOM WE HAD SUPPOSED TO BE AKKADIANS CONFESSED TO US THAT THEY WERE DESCENDANTS OF ISRAELITES CARRIED AWAY MORE THAN A CENTURY BEFORE BY THE ARMIES OF SHALMANESER, KING OF ASSYRIA, BEFORE ASSYRIA WAS SWALLOWED UP BY THE RESTORED EMPIRE OF BAD-EL. SOME OF THESE PEOPLE ADHERED TO THE TRADITIONS OF THEIR FATHERS. SOME OF THEM CAME TO OUR SABBATH GATHERINGS. BUT SOME SCOFFED OPENLY AT ANY MENTION OF THE LAW OF YAHWEH. SOME HAD MAINTAINED THEIR ANCESTRAL LINES, ARRANGING MARRIAGES FOR THEIR CHILDREN ONLY WITH OTHERS OF THE SAME LINE. SOME HAD INTERMARRIED WITH OTHER PEOPLE; BUT SOME OF THE DESCENDANTS OF THESE MIXED MARRIAGES CAME EAGERLY TO OUR SABBATH GATHERINGS, CLAIMING TO BE ISRAELITES, EVEN IF UNCERTAIN OF THEIR LINEAGE.

WE DID NOT SEE MUCH OF DANIEL. HE LIVED IN A DIFFERENT PART OF THE CITY, BUT OCCASIONALLY HE AND HIS FAMILY CAME TO OUR HOME, AND NOW AND THEN WE WOULD BE INVITED TO A SABBATH MEAL AT THEIR HOME. WE BECAME FOND OF THEIR CHILDREN, BUT ESPECIALLY OF THE ELDEST, ISAIAH, WHO WAS TEN YEARS OLD, AND MATURE BEYOND HIS YEARS. HE LIKED TO READ THE ANCIENT BOOKS, AND WAS ESPECIALLY FOND OF THE WRITINGS OF ISAIAH, THE SON OF AMUZ, HIS NAMESAKE.

EVIL-MARDUK WAS NO LONGER AT THE UNIVERSITY. HE HAD SOME SORT OF POSITION IN THE GOVERNMENT, AND I SELDOM SAW HIM. BUT WHEN WE DID MEET BY CHANCE, OUR FRIENDSHIP WAS AS STRONG AS EVER.

OUR FIRST PASSOVER FEAST WAS CELEBRATED JOINTLY WITH SAMUEL AND HIS FAMILY -- I HAD BEEN WITH THEM SO MUCH THAT I FELT THAT I WAS REALLY A PART OF THEIR FAMILY. THE FEAST OF SEVEN WEEKS WE SPENT VERY QUIETLY, FOR THE BIRTH OF OUR FIRST CHILD WAS IMMINENT. HE WAS BORN SOON AFTER THE FEAST, A SON, AND WE WERE VERY PROUD. WE HELD A FEAST ON THE OCCASION OF HIS CIRCUMCISION, AND INVITED MANY FRIENDS, SOME OF MY FELLOW STUDENTS AND TEACHERS, AND OTHER FRIENDS. I HAD SENT AN INVITATION TO EVIL-MARDUK, HARDLY EXPECTING HIM TO COME, BUT HE DID, AND BROUGHT A HANDSOME GIFT TO THE BABY. OUR SOCIAL STANDING WAS IMPROVED CONSIDERABLY WHEN IT BECAME KNOWN THAT A MEMBER OF THE ROYAL FAMILY HAD VISITED US.

AT LAST CAME THE DAY OF MY GRADUATION. NATURALLY, I WAS VERY PROUD, AND THANKFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITIES I HAD HAD. WITH GRADUATION CAME AUTOMATICALLY A COMMISSION IN THE DIPLOMATIC SERVICE. MY SALARY WOULD BE TWENTY MINAS A MONTH, CONSIDERED QUITE GOOD.

BECAUSE OF MY FLUENCY IN EGYPTIAN, I WAS TO BE ATTACHED TO THE EMBASSY AT MEMPHIS, IN EGYPT. ALTHOUGH EGYPT WAS CONSIDERED AN ENEMY NATION, DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WERE STILL MAINTAINED. THERE WOULD BE A GOVERNMENT CARAVAN LEAVING FOR EGYPT IN ABOUT TEN DAYS. JERUSHA AND I DECIDED TO MAKE A VISIT TO CHEBAR WHILE WE WAITED. I RENTED CAMELS FOR THE TRIP. A GOOD CAMEL COULD EASILY MAKE THE JOURNEY IN ONE DAY, WHICH WOULD REQUIRE THREE DAYS ON FOOT.

WE SPENT FIVE DAYS IN CHEBAR, THE LAST DAY BEING THE SABBATH. MOST OF THE TIME WE STAYED AT THE HOME OF JERUSHA'S FATHER. I FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO LIVE IN PEACE WITH MY STEP-MOTHER. SHE DID NOT LIKE OUR "CITIFIED" WAYS, AS SHE CALLED THEM; AND SHE SAID OPENLY THAT IN ACCEPTING A POSITION WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF BAD-EL I WAS BETRAYING MY OWN PEOPLE. JERUSHA HAD A STEP-MOTHER TOO, BUT SHE WAS MORE AGREEABLE.

THERE WERE TWO LITTLE BOYS, ONE FOUR, THE OTHER TWO, AND ANOTHER IN THE OFFING. OUR YESHUA WAS WALKING, AND THE THREE CHILDREN PLAYED HAPPILY TOGETHER. ELASA KEPT BUSY MAKING COPIES OF THE ANCIENT BOOKS, OR PORTIONS OF THEM, FOR WHICH HE FOUND A READY SALE. HE HAD A YOUNG MAN ASSISTING WITH THIS. THOSE WRITTEN ON PARCHMENT SOLD FOR A VERY GOOD PRICE. HE PRESENTED US WITH A PARCHMENT COPY OF AMOS, AND I BOUGHT ONE OF HOSEA, AS I WAS ESPECIALLY FOND OF HIS WRITINGS. WHEN FAR AWAY IN EGYPT WE WOULD NEED SOMETHING TO REMIND US OF THE FAITH OF OUR FATHERS.

FATHER'S BUSINESS SEEMED TO BE THRIVING TOO. A YOUNG APPRENTICE IN HIS SHOP TURNED OUT TO BE BIDKAR, EZEKIEL'S SON. FATHER SAID HE WAS SHOWING A GREAT DEAL OF PROMISE. FATHER HAD MADE A SIGNET RING FOR ME, WHICH PLEASED ME VERY MUCH, AND HE PRESENTED JERUSHA WITH A HANDSOME TURQUOISE BROOCH.

IN THE EVENING, AFTER BIDKAR HAD LEFT THE SHOP, FATHER TOLD ME ABOUT THE DEATH OF EZEKIEL'S WIFE. HE HAD NOT WANTED TO SPEAK OF IT IN THE BOY'S PRESENCE; THE SUBJECT WAS VERY PAINFUL FOR HIM.

"IT WAS SOME SORT OF FEVER," FATHER SAID. "SHE WENT VERY QUICKLY. BUT THE STRANGE THING ABOUT IT WAS THE WAY EZEKIEL TOOK IT. HE NEVER SHED A TEAR, NOR SHOWED THE LEAST SIGN OF GRIEF, THOUGH SHE WAS VERY DEAR TO HIM, AS WE ALL KNEW. PEOPLE ASKED WHY, AND HE SAID IT WAS BY ORDERS HE HAD RECEIVED FROM YAHWEH. 'YAHWEH IS LETTING HIS DEAREST POSSESSION BE DESTROYED,' HE SAID, 'AND AM I TO SHOW GRIEF AT THE DEATH OF MY DEAREST ONE?' 'WHAT POSSESSION?' PEOPLE ASKED. 'JERUSALEM!' EZEKIEL REPLIED. 'YOU CAN'T MEAN IT!' THE PEOPLE SAID, 'JERUSALEM WILL NEVER BE DESTROYED. YAHWEH'S TEMPLE IS THERE, HE WILL NEVER LET IT BE DESTROYED.' 'JUST WAIT AND SEE,' EZEKIEL SAID. 'IT IS COMING, AND IT WON'T BE LONG. THE SIN OF GOD'S PEOPLE IS SO GREAT, DESTRUCTION IS THE ONLY ANSWER POSSIBLE. IT IS BOUND TO COME SOON.'"

"HE IS PROBABLY RIGHT," I SAID. "FROM WHAT I HEAR IN THE CAPITAL, RELATIONS ARE STRAINED, AND I WOULD NOT BE SURPRISED AT ANYTHING. OUR PEOPLE MUST BE COUNTING ON HELP FROM EGYPT, AND IF SO THEY ARE IN FOR A SURPRISE. OF COURSE IT IS A LONG WAY, BUT IF NEDUCHADREZZAR SENDS AN ARMY HE WILL SEND ENOUGH FORCE TO DO THE JOB. THE EGYPTIANS CAN'T POSSIBLY PUT UP ENOUGH FORCE TO STOP HIM. NEDUCHADREZZAR BELIEVES IN BEING SEVERE, AND IF IT COMES TO THAT I'M AFRAID IT WILL REALLY BE DESTRUCTION — TOTAL DESTRUCTION."

"SOME PEOPLE SAY EZEKIEL IS CRAZY," FATHER SAID, BUT I AM CONVINCED THAT HE IS A REAL PROPHET. I HOPE HE IS MISTAKEN IN THIS, BUT I'M AFRAID HE IS RIGHT. AND I DREAD TO THINK OF WHAT YOUR MOTHER MAY HAVE TO GO THROUGH IF THERE IS A SIEGE."

"SO AM I," I SAID. "IF I CAN, I WANT TO STOP AND SEE HER AS I GO TO EGYPT."

"AND IF REAL WAR BREAKS OUT WITH EGYPT, YOU MAY BE CAUGHT IN THE CROSS FIRE YOURSELF."

"WHAT WILL BE, WILL BE," I SAID. "HOW IS EZEKIEL MANAGING, SINCE HIS WIFE DIED? I THINK HE DEPENDED ON HER A LOT."

"HE DID. BUT HANNAH, HIS TWELVE YEAR OLD DAUGHTER, IS MIGHTY GOOD AT LOOKING AFTER THINGS. SOME OF US FRIENDS TRY TO MAKE SURE THEY ALWAYS HAVE ENOUGH FOOD IN THE HOUSE."

ON THE SABBATH DAY I WENT TO VISIT EZEKIEL. HE TALKED ABOUT THE IMPENDING DOOM OF JERUSALEM, ABOUT THE UNFAITHFULNESS OF GOD'S PEOPLE, LIKE A MAN THE NATION TO AN ADULTEROUS WIFE, WANTON WANTON IN HER A BETTERIES WITH MANY LOVERS. HE SHOWED ME A POEM HE HAD WRITTEN.

"I DON'T CLAIM TO BE A POET," HE SAID. "BUT THIS IDEA CAME TO ME AND I WROTE IT DOWN. I THINK IT IS NOT TOO BAD," HE ADDED, HALF APOLOGIZING FOR SAYING SO. "GOOD OR BAD AS POETRY, IT IS TRUE."

I READ IT OVER. IT CERTAINLY NEEDED NO APOLOGY. IT WAS A LAMENTATION OVER THE PRINCES OF JUDAH, IN THE FIGURE OF A LIONESSE (JERUSALEM) WHO BROUGHT UP ONE AFTER ANOTHER OF HER WHELPS TO BECOME RAGING LIONS, ONLY TO HAVE THEM CAPTURED BY HUNTERS AND PUT IN CAGES, ONE IN EGYPT, THE OTHER IN BAB-EL. THE NAMES WERE NOT MENTIONED, BUT PLAINLY THE REFERENCE WAS TO JERDAHAZ AND JECONIAH. THEN A SECOND STROPHE WAS ABOUT A FRUITFUL VINE, (JUDAH) PULLED UP BY THE ROOTS AND DESTROYED, BUT A PORTION TRANSPLANTED INTO A FAR AWAY LAND.*

"THAT IS TRULY GREAT POETRY, EZEKIEL," I SAID. "IT MAKES ONE WANT TO WEEP. SAVE IT; SOME DAY PERHAPS PEOPLE WILL APPRECIATE IT."

"IT'S TRUE, ANYWAY," HE SAID. "JERUSALEM IS GOING TO BE DESTROYED, AND WE HERE, AND WHATEVER OTHER SURVIVORS THERE MAY BE AFTER THE DESTRUCTION, ARE ALL THAT WILL BE LEFT OF THE NATION. WE ARE TRANSPLANTED, AND IT IS UP TO US TO PRESERVE THE NATION AS GOD'S PEOPLE, OBEYING GOD'S LAW."

"BUT WHAT ABOUT JEREMIAH'S LETTER?" I ASKED. "DIDN'T HE SAY THAT AFTER SEVENTY YEARS THE PEOPLE WILL BE RESTORED TO THEIR LAND?"

"YES, HE DID. AND IF JEREMIAH SAID IT, I AM SURE IT IS TRUE. YAHWEH HAS NOT SHOWED ME ANYTHING ABOUT THAT, BUT I AM SURE HE WILL BRING IT TO PASS IN HIS OWN TIME, AND IN HIS OWN WAY. BUT THAT'S A LONG TIME. EVEN IF WE COUNT FROM THE TIME THE FIRST EXILES CAME, THAT WAS SIXTEEN YEARS AGO, IT WOULD STILL BE FIFTY-FOUR YEARS. A LOT OF THINGS CAN HAPPEN IN THAT LENGTH OF TIME."

"IT'S A LONG TIME TO WAIT," I SAID.

"YES, BUT YAHWEH CAN DO WHATEVER HE DECIDES TO DO. HE COULD EVEN MAKE DEAD, DRY BONES COME TO LIFE AND OBEY HIM."

I WENT AWAY, THINKING OF WHAT HE HAD SAID. SOME PEOPLE THOUGHT EZEKIEL WAS CRAZY, BUT CRAZY OR NOT, HE REALLY BELIEVED IN YAHWEH.

THE NEXT MORNING JERUSHA AND I, WITH YESHUA, SET OUT FOR BAB-ILU, TO MAKE READY FOR OUR BIG ADVENTURE, THE TRIP TO EGYPT.

*EZEKIEL 19

EGYPT

WE TRAVELED IN A CARAVAN OF MILITARY PERSONNEL AND SUPPLIES BOUND FOR RIDLAH, WHERE NEDUCHADREZZAR MAINTAINED HIS HEADQUARTERS FOR THE AREA. THIS WAS A WHOLE LOT FASTER THAN THE WALKING TRIP WE HAD MADE FIVE YEARS BEFORE, BUT EVEN CAMELS HAVE TO HAVE SOME TIME TO BROWSE, AND IT TOOK US OVER A MONTH. AFTER RESTING A FEW DAYS AT RIDLAH WE JOINED ANOTHER CARAVAN BOUND FOR EGYPT, GOING BY MEGIDDO. I HAD HOPED TO HAVE OPPORTUNITY TO GO BY JERUSALEM, BUT ORDERS WERE ORDERS, AND I HAD TO FOREGO THAT. I THOUGHT LONGINGLY OF MY MOTHER AND BROTHER AND SISTER, WONDERING HOW THINGS WERE GOING FOR THEM.

AT MEGIDDO WE SAW THE ANCIENT PALACES AND FORTRESSES BUILT BY AHAB, ALMOST THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO. THE FIELD WHERE OUR KING JOSIAH OF BLESSED MEMORY HAD MET HIS DEATH TWENTY YEARS AGO AT THE HAND OF PHARAOH NECHO'S ARMY WAS POINTED OUT TO ME. AH, IF ONLY JOSIAH COULD HAVE LIVED, WHAT A DIFFERENCE IT MIGHT HAVE MADE, I THOUGHT. BUT IT WAS NO USE, HIS ARMY Routed, AND NECHO PRESSED ON WITH HIS ARMY, OCCUPYING JERUSALEM, AND ADVANCING FAR INTO SYRIA. HE MUST HAVE THOUGHT HE WAS GOING TO CONQUER THE WORLD. BUT AT CARCHEMISH NEDUCHADREZZAR HAD IMPOSED A CRUSHING DEFEAT ON HIS ARMY, AND THE SURVIVORS HAD FLED BACK TO EGYPT IN DISGRACE.

LEAVING MEGIDDO, WE WENT ON DOWN THE COASTAL PLAIN, PASSING THE ANCIENT PHILISTINE CITIES OF GATH, ASHKELON AND GAZA, AND CAME AT LAST TO EGYPT. WE ARRIVED AT MEMPHIS JUST AS THE NILE WAS BEGINNING ITS ANNUAL FLOODING.

I SOUGHT OUT THE KHAOTIAN EMBASSY, AND PRESENTED MY CREDENTIALS TO THE AMBASSADOR, BEL-APPLU-LOCINA, A MAN OF COMMANDING PRESENCE AND GREAT DIGNITY, WHOM I LEARNED TO RESPECT AND REVERE, AND WHO, THOUGH NOT EASILY APPROACHABLE, PROVED TO BE A GOOD FRIEND TO HIS YOUNG AND INEXPERIENCED ASSISTANT. THE MAN WHOM I HAD COME TO PERSECUTE WAS GLAD TO SEE ME. HE HAD BEEN THERE TWO YEARS, AND WAS DESPERATELY HOME-SICK. HE HAD NEVER LEARNED TO SPEAK EGYPTIAN PROPERLY, AND HAD BEEN UNHAPPY THE WHOLE TIME.

"EGYPT IS A WONDERFUL PLACE, NO DOUBT ABOUT IT," HE SAID. "BUT BY JERGAH I SURE WILL BE GLAD TO SEE THE ZIGURAT AT BAD-ILU AGAIN. AND WHAT A RELIEF IT WILL BE TO BE FREE OF TRYING TO SPEAK AND UNDERSTAND THIS DEARLY LANGUAGE."

I DID NOT ANTICIPATE ANY PROBLEMS WITH THE LANGUAGE, BUT I DID ENCOUNTER A LOT OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS THAT WERE UNFAMILIAR, AS I HAD EXPECTED. I WAS THANKFUL THAT I HAD A GOOD EAR FOR LANGUAGES, AND SOON I WAS SPEAKING IT AS FREELY AS MY OWN.

WE MOVED INTO THE HOUSE THAT HAD BEEN OCCUPIED BY MY PREDECESSOR, AND TOOK OVER THEIR SERVANTS. I HAD BEEN GIVING JERUSHA LESSONS IN EGYPTIAN ALONG THE WAY, BUT OF COURSE SHE WAS FAR FROM FLUENT. BUT THE SERVANTS SAID SHE DID BETTER THAN HER PREDECESSOR. ANYWAY, THE SERVANTS WERE PATIENT, AND SHE WAS CHEERFUL. YESHUA WAS ONLY BEGINNING TO TALK, AND AS HE GREW HE ABSORBED THE LANGUAGE OF THE SERVANTS AS WELL AS OUR OWN. WE SPOKE HEBREW AT HOME. WHATEVER OTHER LANGUAGES OUR CHILDREN MIGHT LEARN, WE WANTED TO BE SURE THEY KNEW THAT. WE LIVED FIVE YEARS IN THAT HOUSE. OUR DAUGHTER MAHLAH WAS BORN THERE IN THE SECOND YEAR, AND TWO YEARS LATER OUR SON JOAB, WHO PROVED TO BE THE LAST OF OUR BROOD.

OUR FIRST INTRODUCTION TO EGYPT WAS PRETTY ROUGH. THE ANNUAL FLOODING OF THE NILE WAS JUST BEGINNING WHEN WE ARRIVED. OF COURSE WE WERE USED TO FLOODS ON THE EUPHRATES, BUT NOT LIKE THAT. BUT IT WAS AFTER THE RIVER WENT DOWN THAT THE MOSQUITOES APPEARED. THEY TOLD US THERE WERE ALWAYS MOSQUITOES AFTER THE INUNDATION, BUT THAT YEAR WAS THE WORST ANYBODY COULD REMEMBER. I THOUGHT ABOUT ALL THE PLAGUES VISITED ON EGYPT IN THE DAYS OF MOSES, ONE OF THESE BEING "GNATS", PROBABLY BEING THE SAME AS THE MOSQUITOES THAT PLAGUED US. JERUSHA SAID THEY COULDN'T POSSIBLY HAVE BEEN WORSE IN THOSE DAYS THAN THE PLAGUE WE ENDURED.

BUT THEY PASSED, AND DURING OUR FIVE YEAR STAY WE HAD OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A FEW TRIPS UP THE NILE, AND SEE MANY OF THE MARVELOUS MONUMENTS OF THAT LAND. IT WAS A HAPPY TIME, AND EVER AFTERWARD WE REMEMBERED IT FONDLY.

WE FOUND A FEW ISRAELITE PEOPLE IN MEMPHIS. OUR PEOPLE SEEM TO HAVE A WAY OF GETTING AROUND. THEY WERE JUDEAHITES, FOR THE MOST PART, WITH A FEW AS KAHENIM, AND A SCATTERING OF PEOPLE FROM OTHER TRIBES. WE MADE SOME GOOD FRIENDS, BUT A FEW OF THE ISRAELITES WERE RABIDLY ANTI-AKKADIAN, AND ONE EVEN DENOUNCED ME BITTERLY FOR BEING PART OF THE EMBASSY.

IT WAS NICE IN THE COOL SEASON. THE WHOLE CITY SEEMED TO HAVE ON NEW LIFE, THERE WERE ALL SORTS OF PARTIES AND RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS. THE PHARAOH WAS PSAMMETICHUS II, THE SUCCESSOR OF NECTHO. EARLY IN THE COOL SEASON OF OUR FIRST YEAR HE GAVE A LEVEE. I WONDERED IF I, BEING ONLY A JUNIOR ASSISTANT, SHOULD ATTEND, BUT THE AMBASSADOR SAID TO GO, BY ALL MEANS; THAT ALL THE DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY WOULD BE THERE. SO I DID GO, AND IT WAS JUST AS WELL, FOR THERE WERE FEW ENOUGH THERE WHO COULD SPEAK EGYPTIAN, ARAMAIC AND GREEK. THE AMBASSADOR HIMSELF WAS LAMENTABLY WEAK IN GREEK. HE WAS VERY GLAD TO HAVE ME BY HIM, FOR GREEK WAS RAPIDLY BECOMING THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE. MANY OF THE DIPLOMATS COULD HARDLY SPEAK EGYPTIAN, AND THOSE FROM THE WEST HARDLY SPOKE ARAMAIC AT ALL. BESIDES OUR OWN, THERE WERE AMBASSADORS FROM CARTHAGE, CYRENE, SYRACUSE, ATHENS, SPARTA AND CRETE, ALSO FROM ETHIOPIA, SHEBA AND ROME. AND OF COURSE EACH AMBASSADOR HAD ASSISTANTS, SECRETARIES, AND INTERPRETERS. ANY IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT HAD TO BE REPEATED IN TWO OR THREE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES, TO MAKE SURE EVERYBODY UNDERSTOOD IT.

CARTHAGE WAS RECOGNIZED AS THE OUTSTANDING MARITIME POWER, A DISTINCTION FORMERLY CLAIMED BY TYRE; BUT TYRE, NOW A PART OF OUR EMPIRE, HAD NEVER FULLY RECOVERED FROM THE LONG SIEGE THEY HAD ENDURED BEFORE FINALLY YIELDING TO NEBUCHADREZZAR. CARTHAGE WAS SAID TO HAVE HAD ITS ORIGIN AS A PHOENICIAN COLONY, AND THE CARTHAGINIANS SPOKE A LANGUAGE SIMILAR TO ARAMAIC.

SYRACUSE HAD BEEN A GREEK COLONY TO BEGIN WITH, BUT WAS NOW AN INDEPENDENT NATION. AND CYRENE, WHICH HAD STARTED AS A COLONY OF SYRACUSE, WAS ALSO RECOGNIZED AS A NATION TO BE RECKONED WITH. ROME WAS THOUGHT OF AS AN UPSTART NATION, BUT IN OUR DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY THERE WAS NOBODY MORE ARROGANT THAN THE ROMANS. ETHIOPIA WAS FAR TO THE SOUTH, UP THE NILE RIVER. SHEBA COULD BE REACHED BY SHIP, A LONG, LONG VOYAGE, THEY SAID, ALONG THE NARROW SEA. THEIR PEOPLE SPOKE A LANGUAGE DISTANTLY RELATED TO HEBREW.

OF THE DOZEN OR MORE GREEK NATIONS, ATHENS, SPARTA AND CRETE WERE THE ONLY ONES REPRESENTED AT THE PHARAOH'S COURT. ONE OF MY TEACHERS USED TO TELL US THAT IF THE GREEKS COULD LEAVE OFF FIGHTING AMONG THEMSELVES AND UNITE, THEY MIGHT WELL CONQUER THE WORLD. THESE THREE GREEK AMBASSADORS ALWAYS SEEMED TO BE AT DAGGERS POINTS THERE IN MEMPHIS.

THERE WERE ALWAYS WARS, AND RUMORS OF WARS AMONG ALL THESE NATIONS, BUT IN OUR DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY WE PRESERVED AT LEAST A SEMBLANCE OF PEACE. BUT THERE WERE ALWAYS INTRIGUES GOING ON, ONE NEVER KNEW WHAT TO EXPECT.

THE FIRST YEAR WE WERE IN EGYPT PHARAOH PSAMMETICHUS MOUNTED A NAVAL EXPEDITION TO ATTACK TYRE. THERE WAS A LOT OF TALK ABOUT IT. THEY SAID THEY WERE GOING TO "LIBERATE" TYRE FROM NEBUCHADREZZAR'S RULE. BUT NOTHING CAME OF IT. THEY HUSHED IT UP, BUT RUMOR HAD IT THAT THE EGYPTIANS HAD LOST SEVERAL SHIPS AND A LOT OF MEN. THEN, RIGHT AFTER THAT, THE PHARAOH DIED, AND THEN ALL THE CONVERSATION WAS ABOUT THE STATE FUNERAL, AND THE CORONATION OF THE NEW PHARAOH. HE HAD A LONG, INVOLVED NAME, GENERALLY SHORT-NAMED TO APRIES. THE GREEKS CALLED HIM HOPHRA.

AN EMBASSAGE CAME FROM ZEDEKIAH, IN JERUSALEM, REPORTING THAT THEY HAD BROUGHT A SUBSTANTIAL TREASURE. I WONDERED HOW MUCH MY MOTHER WOULD HAVE BEEN TAXED TO RAISE THIS SUM. CERTAIN IT WAS THAT ZEDEKIAH WAS APPEALING FOR EGYPTIAN HELP, HOPING TO BE FREE FROM NEBUCHADREZZAR'S

"OPPRESSION", AS THEY LIKED TO CALL IT. I WONDERED WHAT THEY WOULD HAVE CALLED THE SORT OF GOVERNMENT THAT THE EGYPTIANS WOULD HAVE GIVEN THEM.

I TALKED TO MY CHIEF ABOUT IT. "DON'T WORRY," HE SAID. "THEY ARE NOT PUTTING ANYTHING OVER ON NEBUCHADREZZAR, AND MY GUESSES ARE THAT THEY ARE GOING TO PAY A FRIGHTFUL PRICE FOR THIS REBELLION."

"I'M WORRIED ABOUT MY MOTHER," I SAID, "THERE IN JERUSALEM." HE SHOOK HIS HEAD.

THE NEWS WAS NOT LONG IN COMING. THE KING HAD SENT NEBU-ZAR-ADDAN, ONE OF HIS BEST GENERALS, WITH A STRONG FORCE. THEY HAD SURROUNDED THE CITY AND BEGUN THE SIEGE. PHARAOH HOPHRA MADE GREAT ANNOUNCEMENTS ABOUT THE WAR TO "LIBERATE" JERUSALEM, AND SENT AN ARMY. THE GENERAL SAW THAT HE WAS OUTNUMBERED, AND REFRAINED FROM ANY DIRECT CONTACT WITH THE HITTITES. THE ARMY MARCHED UP AND DOWN THE GAZA STRIP, THREATENED GAZA, BUT MADE NO SERIOUS ATTEMPT TO TAKE IT. I PRAYED FOR THE DELIVERANCE OF JERUSALEM, AND FOR MY MOTHER'S SAFETY. THAT WAS ALL I COULD DO.

THE ARMY RETURNED, PRATING OF VICTORY, WHICH EVERYBODY KNEW WAS A BALD FACED LIE. TO COVER UP THIS SHAME, PHARAOH HOPHRA MOUNTED AN INVASION OF CYRENE, WHERE THE ARMY DID SEE SOME ACTION, MORE THAN THEY HAD BARGAINED FOR. THEY WERE UTTERLY ROUTED, WITH HEAVY LOSSES.

THE FIRST POSITIVE NEWS WE HAD CAME JUST AFTER MY BIRTHDAY TWENTY-SEVEN, WHEN A MAN CAME TO TELL ME THAT A BAND OF SEVERAL HUNDRED ISRAELITES HAD ARRIVED IN EGYPT, SEEKING ASYLUM. THEY HAD BEEN PLACED IN A REFUGEE CAMP, WHERE FOOD WAS PROVIDED FOR THEM UNTIL THEY COULD BE ABSORBED INTO THE LIFE OF EGYPT. I WAS GLAD TO HEAR THAT, BUT I REFLECTED THAT FOR THE TREASURE SENT TO BUY EGYPTIAN AID THIS WAS A MEAGER COMPENSATION.

I WENT TO VISIT THEM, AND TALKED WITH SEVERAL, WHO TOLD GHOSTLY STORIES OF THE STARVATION AND DISEASE IN JERUSALEM BEFORE THE CITY'S FALL, OF THE RUTHLESS DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE AND ALL IMPORTANT BUILDINGS AND THE CITY WALL, AND OF THE HORRIBLE ATROCITIES IN THE SACK OF THE CITY. I FOUND NOBODY WHO COULD TELL ME ANYTHING ABOUT MY MOTHER, OR ANY OTHER FRIEND OR RELATIVE EXCEPT OF THE MURDER OF MY COUSIN GEDALIAH. HE HAD BEEN APPOINTED CIVIL GOVERNOR OF WHAT WAS LEFT OF JUDAH AFTER THE FALL OF THE CITY, WITH HEADQUARTERS AT MIZPAH -- JERUSALEM WAS NOT HABITABLE AT ALL AFTER THE WANTON DESTRUCTION. A BAND OF DIE-HARD PATRIOTS HAD MURDERED GEDALIAH AND THOSE WHO WERE ASSISTING HIM WITH HIS DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENT. THEN, FEELING THE VENGEANCE OF THE OCCUPATION FORCES, THEY HAD FLED TO EGYPT. A FEW OTHER STRAGGLERS HAD JOINED THE MURDEROUS GANG IN THEIR FLIGHT, HOPING TO SURVIVE.

THEY DID TELL ME THAT SOME PRISONERS HAD BEEN TAKEN AWAY, TO BE SETTLED IN BABYLON, PEOPLE OF THE BETTER FAMILIES, WHO HAD OPPOSED THE REBELLION. THEY SAID THERE WERE EIGHT HUNDRED THIRTY-TWO OF THEM. I HOPED THAT MY MOTHER AND BROTHER AND SISTER MIGHT HAVE BEEN AMONG THEM. THEY TOLD ALSO OF THE VENGEANCE TAKEN ON ZEDEKIAH, OF HIS BEING BLINDED AFTER WITNESSING THE SLAUGHTER OF HIS SONS AND KINDRED, THEN TAKEN TO BABYLON, TO BE ADDED TO THE NUMBER OF KINGS HELD THERE AS CAPTIVES.

THEN SOMEBODY MENTIONED THAT JEREMIAH WAS AMONG THE REFUGEES.

"JEREMIAH?" I CALLED. "HOW IS HE DOING HERE? HE WAS PRO-BAB-EL."

"SO HE WAS," THEY SAID. "AND NEBU-ZAD-NESAR KNEW IT, AND HAD HIM BROUGHT HERE PROTECTED WHEN THE CITY FELL. HE HAD ALWAYS FAVORERED AGAINST GOING TO EGYPT. HE HAD INSISTED THAT HE WAS TOO OLD, THAT HE COULD NOT STAND THE TRIP, AND REFUSED TO GO TO WALK. SO WE PUT HIM IN A LITTER, AND CARRIED HIM AWAY."

"WHAT A THING TO DO!" I SAID. "WHERE IS HE NOW?"

THEY TOOK ME TO HIM. HE WAS OLD, AND VERY FRAGILE, BUT HE STILL WAS STILL VIGOROUS. WHEN I TOLD HIM WHO I WAS, HE REMEMBERED ME, OR AT LEAST HE REMEMBERED MY FATHER. I REMINDED HIM OF THE LETTER HE HAD SENT BY US, ELEVEN YEARS BEFORE.

"AND WHAT I SAID IN THE LETTER I STILL SAY," HE SAID. "THIS DESTRUCTION IS A TERRIBLE THING, BUT YAHWEH IS NOT THROUGH WITH US. HERE I AM IN EGYPT, WHERE I NEVER WANTED TO GO, AND I SHALL DIE HERE, AND IT WON'T BE LONG. BUT YOU JUST WAIT! YAHWEH WILL BRING HIS PURPOSE TO PASS. I DON'T KNOW JUST HOW, BUT I AM SURE OF IT. WE ARE STILL HIS PEOPLE. HE WILL BRING US BACK. YOU MAY EVEN LIVE TO SEE IT."

HE ASKED HOW THE PEOPLE WERE DOING IN THE LAND OF THEIR CAPTIVITY. I GAVE HIM A REPORT THAT SEEMED TO ENCOURAGE HIM. I TOLD HIM ABOUT EZEKIEL AND HIS VISION, AND WHAT HE WAS DOING TO KEEP THE PEOPLE FAITHFUL TO YAHWEH.

"THAT'S GOOD," HE SAID. "THAT'S THE SORT OF THING WE MUST DO, NO MATTER WHERE WE ARE, WE ARE STILL GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE. HE WILL KEEP HIS PROMISES, WE NEVER FEAR."

I HAD TO TAKE MY LEAVE, BUT WAS GLAD THAT THE OLD PROPHET HAD BEEN ENCOURAGED BY MY VISIT. A FEW DAYS LATER I LEARNED THAT HE WAS DEAD.

MY ORDERS CAME THROUGH, TO GO BACK TO BAB-EL. I DREADED THE TRIP, JERUSHA DREADED IT EVEN MORE, ON ACCOUNT OF THE CHILDREN. BUT BEFORE TIME FOR THE CARAVAN TO GO I CHANCED TO MEET THE AMBASSADOR FROM SHEBA, WHO TOLD ME OF A SHIP DUE TO SAIL FOR SHEBA SOON. I BOOKED PASSAGE ON THAT, CONFIDENT THAT FROM THERE WE COULD FIND A SHIP GOING TO WARKA, THE PORT AT THE MOUTH OF THE EUPHRATES. WE HAD NEVER TRAVELED BY SHIP, BUT THOUGHT SURELY IT WOULD BE BETTER THAN THE LONG JOURNEY OVER LAND. AT LEAST THERE WOULD BE NO DUST, WE THOUGHT. THE CHILDREN WERE EXCITED AT THE PROSPECT OF A SEA VOYAGE, ESPECIALLY YESHUA AND MAHLAH. JOAB WAS STILL TOO LITTLE TO CARE MUCH.

"ADI, WILL WE SEE THE QUEEN OF SHEBA?" YESHUA ASKED. WE HAD TOLD HIM THE STORY OF THE QUEEN THAT HAD VISITED KING SOLOMON, LONG AGO. JERUSHA ANSWERED. "OF COURSE WE WILL," SHE ASSURED HIM.

ISAIAH

ONE REASON THAT I HAD FAVORED THE TRAVEL BY SEA WAS THAT I HAD A GOOD BIT OF GOLD, SAVED FROM MY SALARY, AND I HOPED IT WOULD BE SAFER THAT WAY. CARAVANS WERE OFTEN ATTACKED. OF COURSE THERE WAS THE CHANCE OF BEING ATTACKED BY PIRATES AT SEA, BUT THE DANGER OF THAT SEEMED LESS. WE HAD BEEN LIVING FRUGALLY, AND I HOPED TO INVEST THIS MONEY IF I COULD GET SAFELY BACK TO BAB-EL WITH IT. ANYWAY, WE DID DECIDE ON THE SEA VOYAGE.

AND WE WERE GLAD WE HAD MADE THAT DECISION. WE HAD A VERY AGREEABLE VOYAGE, LASTING SIXTEEN DAYS. THE SUN WAS FRIGHTFULLY HOT, BUT THE MARINERS HAD RIGGED UP AWNINGS SO THAT WE COULD HAVE SHADE, AND THERE WAS GENERALLY A GOOD BREEZE. THE SEA WAS FAIRLY CALM, NO PROBLEM WITH SEASICKNESS.

WE STAYED THREE MONTHS IN SHEDA, AND IT WAS A PLEASANT TIME FOR US. MUCH OF ARADIA IS UTTER DESERT, BUT SHEDA, AT THE EXTREME SOUTH, GETS ENOUGH RAINFALL TO MAKE IT A FRUITFUL LAND. SOONER OR LATER, PEOPLE TOLD US, THERE WOULD BE A SHIP BOUND FOR WARKA. IN THE MEANTIME, LIFE WAS PLEASANT, AND WE HAD FEW CARES.

AND WE DID GET TO SEE THE QUEEN OF SHEDA. THE AMBASSADOR HAD TOLD US THAT THE OLD KING WAS LIKELY TO BE SUCCEEDED BY HIS DAUGHTER, AS HE HAD NO SONS; AND WHEN WE ARRIVED WE LEARNED THAT THE OLD KING HAD BEEN DEAD ALMOST A YEAR. THE CAPTAIN OF THE SHIP HAD SPREAD THE WORD THAT I WAS AN AMBASSADOR OF NEBUCHADREZZAR, WHICH OF COURSE I WAS NOT, AND WHEN THE QUEEN HEARD THE REPORT SHE SUMMONED ME TO THE PALACE. SHE WAS A VERY GRACIOUS LADY, AND SPOKE ARAMAIC FLUENTLY. WHEN I MENTIONED MY FAMILY, SHE INVITED US ALL FOR AN INFORMAL VISIT. YESHUA WAS ECSTATIC.

HE TOLD YOU WE WOULD GET TO SEE THE QUEEN OF SHEDA, IF JERUSHA SAID. THERE WAS ANOTHER ADVANTAGE. WHILE WE WAITED, A SHIP CAME IN FROM THE LANDS FAR TO THE EAST, LOADED WITH SPICES, BOUND FOR EGYPT. I INVENTED THE MAJOR PART OF MY SAVINGS IN SPICES, WHICH I WAS ABLE TO SELL IN BABYLON AT A VERY HANDSOME PROFIT. I ALSO BOUGHT SOME GEMS AND PEARLS, WHICH I THOUGHT MY FATHER COULD USE TO GOOD ADVANTAGE.

A SHIP DID COME AT LAST, AND WE EMBARKED. THIS PASSAGE WAS LESS AGREEABLE THAN THE OTHER, BUT WE ENDURED THE DISCOMFORTS AND ARRIVED AT WARKA. THERE WE WERE ABLE TO HIRE CAMELS FOR THE TRIP TO CHEBAR. WE WANTED TO VISIT OUR PEOPLE, AND OF COURSE THEY WERE VERY GLAD TO SEE US.

ELASA'S FAMILY HAD INCREASED, THERE WERE NOW SIX CHILDREN. THEY ALL SEEMED HAPPY, AND OUR CHILDREN ENJOYED THEM DURING THE TWO WEEKS THAT WE STAYED. FATHER WAS WELL, AND HIS BUSINESS WAS FLOURISHING. MY STEP-MOTHER WAS BITTER AND UNHAPPY, AND JERUSHA THOUGHT SHE WAS SERIOUSLY ILL, THOUGH SHE WAS STILL ABLE TO GET UP AND CARE FOR THE HOUSE. TIRZAH, MY HALF SISTER, WAS NINE, AN ADORABLE CHILD. FATHER SAID SHE WAS A GREAT COMFORT TO HIM.

FATHER WAS PLEASED WITH THE GEMS AND PEARLS I HAD BROUGHT. WE SPENT MUCH TIME TOGETHER. I WAS DISAPPOINTED TO LEARN THAT MOTHER WAS NOT AMONG THE CAPTIVES THAT HAD COME AFTER THE FALL OF JERUSALEM. NOBODY HAD ANY CERTAIN NEWS OF HER. BARUCH HAD COME, BRINGING THE MANUSCRIPT OF JEREMIAH'S COLLECTED WRITINGS. BARUCH SAID HE THOUGHT MOTHER MIGHT HAVE GONE TO ANATHOTH AFTER THE CITY'S FALL, BUT WAS NOT SURE. SO HOPE WAS NOT ENTIRELY DEAD, BUT WAS PRETTY FAINT.

FATHER TOLD ME AN INTERESTING THING ABOUT EZEKIEL. IT WAS IN THE TENTH YEAR OF OUR CAPTIVITY, THE TENTH MONTH, THE TENTH DAY OF THE MONTH. I REMEMBER THE DATE, FOR I WROTE IT DOWN CAREFULLY. EZEKIEL HAD BEEN PREACHING ABOUT THE COMING DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM, WHICH WOULD BE AS A PUNISHMENT FOR ALL THE SIN AND REBELLION OF OUR PEOPLE, HE SAID. NONE OF US LIKED TO HEAR SUCH NEWS, WE ALL HOPED THAT SOMEHOW THE CITY MIGHT BE SAVED. AND MANY OF OUR EXILES REFUSED TO BELIEVE IT, INSISTING THAT EZEKIEL WAS CRAZY.

"BUT THAT DAY THERE WERE TWELVE OF US THERE TO HEAR HIM, AND HE SAID TO US SOLEMNLY, 'WRITE DOWN THIS DATE. THIS IS THE DAY. THIS VERY DAY THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM HAS BEGUN.' MANY OF US SCOFFED AT HIM, BUT IN MY HEART I WAS NEVER MORE CONVINCED THAT HE IS REALLY A PROPHET. HE SAID, 'SCOFF IF YOU WILL, BUT WRITE DOWN THE DATE. YOU WILL SEE THAT I AM RIGHT.' AND YOU KNOW, HE WAS RIGHT. AS WE FOUND OUT LATER, IT WAS THAT VERY DAY THAT THE SIEGE BEGAN."

"INCREDIBLE!" I SAID. "HOW COULD HE POSSIBLY KNOW?"

"ONLY BY DIVINE REVELATION," FATHER SAID. "AND THAT CONVINCES ME THAT WE OUGHT TO TAKE ALL HIS PREACHING SERIOUSLY. I KNOW HE DOES SOME THINGS THAT LOOK CRAZY, BUT HE SURELY IS A PROPHET, AND WE HAD BETTER PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT HE TELLS US TO DO."

"WHAT DOES HE TELL US TO DO?"

"HE TELLS US TO KEEP ON OBSERVING THE COMMANDMENTS, JUST AS WE HAVE BEEN TAUGHT. HE SAYS, 'DON'T THINK, JUST BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN DRIVEN OUT OF OUR LAND AND HAVE BEEN CAST IN THIS HEATHEN COUNTRY, THAT IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT WE DO. IT DOES MATTER!' AND ESPECIALLY HE SAYS, 'DON'T MAKE ANY CONCESSION TO THE SO-CALLED GODS OF THIS LAND. YAHWEH IS THE ONLY GOD! NO MATTER WHERE WE ARE, WE ARE STILL HIS PEOPLE. HE HAS NOT FORGOTTEN US.'"

THAT MADE ME THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT MY OWN SITUATION. I RESOLVED TO HAVE A TALK WITH EZEKIEL.

"ANOTHER THING HE DOES," FATHER WENT ON, "HE URGES US TO COME TOGETHER IN GROUPS ON THE SABBATH DAY, TO READ FROM OUR SACRED BOOKS AND PRAY TO YAHWEH. 'DON'T WORRY ABOUT SACRIFICES,' HE SAYS. 'WE CAN'T WORSHIP WITH SACRIFICES ANYWHERE EXCEPT THE PLACE THAT GOD HAS APPOINTED; BUT WE CAN STILL WORSHIP. AND WE NEED TO COME TOGETHER TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER, AND BE REMINDED THAT WE ARE STILL GOD'S PEOPLE.'"

I DID GO TO VISIT EZEKIEL. HE HAD NOT REMARRIED, BUT WAS LIVING WITH HIS MARRIED DAUGHTER HANNAH, WHO CARED FOR ALL HIS NEEDS. SHE WAS DEVOTED TO HIM, I COULD SEE. EZEKIEL WAS OUTSIDE; HANNAH TALKED TO ME WHILE WE WAITED FOR HIM TO COME IN.

"NO MATTER WHAT PEOPLE SAY, HE IS NOT CRAZY," SHE SAID. "I KNOW HE HAS DONE SOME STRANGE THINGS, BUT THAT IS JUST THE WAY HE IS. SOMETIMES HE GOES INTO A SORT OF TRANCE, AND DOESN'T EAT, OR DRINK, OR SPEAK FOR TWO OR THREE DAYS. THEN HE COMES OUT OF IT, AND IS JUST HIS NATURAL SELF AGAIN. HE SAYS HE HAS SEEN A VISION, BUT WON'T TELL US WHAT HE HAS SEEN. BUT HE DOES A LOT OF WRITING."

"HAVE YOU READ ANY OF IT? WHAT IS IT ABOUT?"

"I HAVEN'T TRIED TO READ IT. YOU KNOW I NEVER LEARNED TO READ VERY WELL, AND WHAT I HAVE LOOKED AT DOESN'T MAKE MUCH SENSE TO ME. BUT I SAVE EVERYTHING HE WRITES. MAYBE SOME DAY THEY CAN BE PUT TOGETHER TO MAKE A BOOK."

"YES, DO THAT," I SAID. "YOUR FATHER IS A PROPHET, AND WHATEVER HE WRITES COMES FROM YAHWEH, EVEN IF WE FIND IT HARD TO UNDERSTAND."

EZEKIEL CAME IN. HE REMEMBERED ME, AND WE HAD A LONG CONVERSATION.

"DO YOU THINK I AM DOING WRONG TO GO ON WITH THIS WORK FOR THE GOVERNMENT?" I ASKED. "A LOT OF TIMES I HAVE TO BE PRESENT WHEN SACRIFICES ARE OFFERED TO WHAT THEY CALL GODS. I DON'T TAKE ANY PART IN IT, BUT I CAN'T ESCAPE BEING PRESENT. BUT IN MY PRIVATE LIFE I TRY TO OBEY ALL THE COMMANDMENTS, AND TEACH MY CHILDREN TO DO THE SAME."

EZEKIEL SAT FOR A WHILE, IN THOUGHT. THEN HE SAID, "NO, I DON'T THINK YOU OUGHT TO GIVE UP YOUR WORK. IT MUST BE THAT YAHWEH HAS PUT YOU WHERE YOU ARE FOR A SPECIAL PURPOSE. SOME DAY YOU MAY BE USEFUL TO OUR PEOPLE BECAUSE OF YOUR POSITION. GOD ACTS IN STRANGE WAYS, SOMETIMES. WHO KNOWS WHAT MAY HAPPEN? TRY TO BE FAITHFUL, ASK GOD TO SHOW YOU THE WAY."

HIS ADVICE GAVE ME SOME COMFORT, BUT I STILL WONDERED.

WE WENT ON TO THE CAPITAL. I FOUND A HOUSE FOR RENT IN A NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE SEVERAL FAMILIES OF OUR PEOPLE LIVED, AND WE ENJOYED THE FELLOWSHIP WITH THEM. WE WOULD GET TOGETHER ON SABBATH EVENINGS IN ONE HOME OR ANOTHER. WE HAD GOT FROM ELASA A COMPLETE SET OF OUR SACRED BOOKS, AND WE WOULD TAKE TURNS, READING FROM THE TORAH OR THE PROPHETS OR THE PSALMS. WE WOULD MAKE PRAYERS, AND SING TOGETHER. WE BEGAN TO REFER TO THESE GATHERINGS AS THE KENOSHET.

IT WAS SAMUEL WHO HELPED US FIND THE HOUSE, THE SAME MERCHANT I HAD WORKED FOR DURING MY STUDENT DAYS. HE HELPED ME DISPOSE OF MY CARGO OF SPICES, AND SINCE HE WAS NOW A BANKER AS WELL AS A MERCHANT, I DEPOSITED MY SAVINGS WITH HIM. WE DID NOT WANT TO BUY A HOUSE, AS I MIGHT BE SENT AWAY AGAIN. BUT JERUSHA KEPT HOPING THAT SOME DAY WE COULD HAVE A PERMANENT HOME.

IT WAS OVER TWO YEARS BEFORE I WAS SENT ON ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT. IN THE MEANTIME, I HAD AN OFFICE, AND SOME ROUTINE DUTIES. LIFE WAS EASY, AND AGREEABLE. BY THE TIME WE WERE SETTLED IN BAD-EL, MAHLAH WAS OLD ENOUGH TO BEGIN A SCHOOL; YESHUA HAD ALREADY BEEN ATTENDING SCHOOL BEFORE WE LEFT EGYPT.

WE OFTEN VISITED IN THE HOME OF DANIEL. I WAS PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN HIS SON ISAIAH. HE WAS EIGHTEEN, AND IN HIS THIRD YEAR AT THE UNIVERSITY, MAJORING IN MATHEMATICS AND ASTRONOMY. HE READ ALL THE SUMERIAN AND AKKADIAN CLASSICS, BUT MOST OF ALL HE LIKED TO READ OUR SACRED BOOKS. HE HAD READ THEM OVER AND OVER, AND ALMOST KNEW THEM BY HEART.

ISAIAH HAD BEEN WRITING SOME POETRY, BUT REFUSED TO SHOW IT TO ME. "IT ISN'T READY YET," HE SAID. "I WANT TO WORK OVER IT SOME MORE, THEN MAYBE I CAN SHOW IT TO YOU."

"WELL, KEEP IT UP," I SAID.

HE HESITATED, THEN SAID, "DO YOU.....?" HE PAUSED, THEN WENT ON SHYLY, "DO YOU THINK IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE THAT YAHWEH IS CALLING ME TO BE A PROPHET?"

"I DON'T KNOW," I SAID. "WHAT MAKES YOU THINK IT MIGHT BE SO?"

"WELL, I HAVEN'T HAD ANY VISIONS, OR HEARD ANY HEAVENLY VOICES. BUT I HAVE BEEN DOING A LOT OF THINKING. OF COURSE I AM VERY YOUNG....."

"JEREMIAH WAS YOUNG, BUT GOD CALLED HIM. YOU HAVE READ HIS BOOK, HAVEN'T YOU?"

"HAVE I READ IT? THAT MAN WAS REALLY A PROPHET!"

"WELL, I GUESS YOU HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE — LIKE THE BOY SAMUEL, SAYING 'SPEAK, LORD, FOR THY SERVANT HEARETH.'"

"YES, THAT'S WHAT I TRY TO DO. ONLY I DON'T HEAR ANY VOICE FROM HEAVEN. BUT I KEEP THINKING. YAHWEH BROUGHT OUR FATHERS OUT OF EGYPT, YEARS AGO, PASSING THROUGH THE SEA. HOW WOULD IT BE IF HE DID IT AGAIN, AND OPENED UP A ROAD THROUGH THE DESERT FOR US TO GO BACK TO OUR COUNTRY?"

"IT'S A GREAT THOUGHT," I SAID. "YOU REMEMBER THAT JEREMIAH SAID, 'AFTER SEVENTY YEARS I WILL GATHER MY PEOPLE UP AND BRING THEM BACK, SAYS YAHWEH.' OF COURSE, SEVENTY YEARS IS A LONG TIME, BUT TIME PASSES."

"Yes, it does," he said. "It has been twenty-two years since my father and the others with him came over here. If we count from that time it is just forty-eight years. You and I might live to see it happen."

"At least we can hope for it."

"I had another thought," he said. "We may think we are few, and helpless, but when God started out with Abraham, he was just one! There are thousands of us now."

Still not many, I thought, compared with the mighty empire of Akkad.

"And then there is this," Isaiah said. "Yahweh chose our fathers, and made them a nation. Why? Just so that we could be like other nations, fighting and killing and conquering and ruling the world? I think he must have chosen us so that he could reveal himself to us. Maybe Yahweh has a plan for all the nations. Maybe he is showing himself to us so that our people can be an instrument in his hand, to make him known to all the nations! And if that is so, then maybe all the sufferings of our people would have some meaning, some purpose. All that has happened to us is punishment, and I am sure we deserved it; but maybe it was not only punishment, but would be for a purpose, to make us into the sort of instrument God can use. It would be a little like a sacrifice -- when a lamb is killed it is for a purpose. Perhaps the sufferings of our people are a sort of sacrifice."

I had not thought of it in those terms; it was a little too much for me. Anyway, it was time to go. "Keep thinking," I told him. "And I want to see that poem when you get it finished."

That night in bed I told Jerusha about our conversation. She was impressed. "That boy is a prophet," she said. "He really is a prophet!"

We celebrated my birthday thirty. Where had my youth gone? I wondered. Now I was old enough to be inducted into the priesthood, if only there were a high priest to induct me. And anyway, we had no temple, no proper place for worship. But we could hope that maybe some day.....

During all this time I had not seen Evil-Marduk. He was with the army, I was told, away up in Urartu. His son, Nergal-sharezer, was in the capital, going to school, living in the palace. The king, I heard people say, was extremely fond of this grandson, though he must have had dozens of grandsons, perhaps hundreds, for he had many wives.

For the Passover feast, just after my thirtieth birthday, we were invited to share with Daniel's family. As we read the account of the delivery from bondage in Egypt so long ago our hearts were filled with hope. "Some day," we all said at the end of the meal, "we'll do this in our own land." It was a happy time. All the children seemed to enjoy the occasion.

As we were leaving, Daniel said to me, "Come to my office tomorrow. I think we may have another assignment for you."

"Any special time?" I asked.

"ABOUT MID MORNING, IF THAT IS CONVENIENT."

"I'LL MAKE IT CONVENIENT," I SAID.

AFTER THE CHILDREN WERE ASLEEP THAT NIGHT JERUSHA AND I TALKED IT OVER, WONDERING WHAT SORT OF ASSIGNMENT I MIGHT HAVE.

"IF YOU COULD HAVE A CHOICE," I SAID, "WHICH OF COURSE YOU HAVE IT, WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD LIKE FOR US TO GO?"

"I REMEMBER THE MOUNTAINS ROUND ABOUT JERUSALEM," SHE SAID. "THIS COUNTRY IS SO FLAT, AND EGYPT WAS FLAT. IN SHEMA WE COULD SEE MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE. I THINK IT WOULD BE NICE IF WE WERE SENT SOMEWHERE WHERE THERE ARE MOUNTAINS."

"NICE TO DREAM ABOUT, ANYWAY," I SAID. "BUT WE'LL HAVE TO TAKE WHATEVER THEY GIVE US."

I WENT TO DANIEL'S OFFICE THE NEXT MORNING.

"DIDN'T YOU TELL ME," HE SAID AS SOON AS WE WERE SEATED COMFORTABLY,

"THAT YOUR COUSIN — WHAT WAS HIS NAME? — HAD SERVED UP NORTH, SOMEWHERE?"

"YES," I SAID. "HANANI IS HIS NAME. HE IS MY SECOND COUSIN, AND IS MARRIED TO MY SISTER. THAT WAS ELEVEN YEARS AGO, AND I HAVE HEARD NOTHING FROM HIM SINCE."

"DO YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS LIVING?"

"HE CALLED THE PLACE AXMINA. HE SAID IT WAS IN SIGHT OF MOUNT ARARAT, AND GAVE ME SOME VERY SKETCHY DIRECTIONS ABOUT HOW TO GET THERE. THAT'S AS MUCH AS I CAN TELL YOU. WHY?"

"I MENTIONED THAT TO THE KING, AND HE IS INTERESTED. HE IS HAVING AN AUDIENCE THIS MORNING. LET'S GO OVER THERE. MAYBE HE WILL TALK TO YOU."

SO WE WENT. KING NEBUCHADREZZAR WAS SEATED ON HIS THRONE, WITH A LOT OF NOBLES STANDING AROUND. THERE WAS A MAN WHO SEEMED TO BE MAKING SOME SORT OF PLEA, AN ADVOCATE WAS READING A PETITION. THE KING LOOKED UP AS WE ENTERED, SMILED, AND HELD UP TWO FINGERS.

"THAT MEANS JUST THIS CASE AND ONE MORE, THEN HE WILL SEE US," DANIEL EXPLAINED. DANIEL APPEARED TO BE ON VERY GOOD TERMS WITH THE KING.

WE WAITED ABOUT AN HOUR; THE KING MADE SOME DECISION ABOUT THE TWO CASES, THEN STOOD UP TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE AUDIENCE WAS AT AN END. ALL THE NOBLES LEFT THE HALL, ONLY TWO ATTENDANTS REMAINED, AND A TALL MAN, ACCOMPANIED BY A BOY ABOUT TWELVE YEARS OLD.

THE KING GREETED US INFORMALLY, AND LED US INTO A PRIVATE CHAMBER. HE TOLD THE ATTENDANTS TO HAVE LUNCH BROUGHT TO US THERE. THEY DEPARTED ON THEIR ERRAND. THE KING INTRODUCED THE BOY.

"THIS IS MY GRANDSON, NERGA-SHAREZER," HE SAID. AND THIS IS HIS TUTOR, ABBASHAGGA."

I BOWED TO THE LITTLE PRINCE. "YOUR FATHER AND I WERE GOOD FRIENDS IN THE UNIVERSITY," I SAID.

"YES SIR," HE REPLIED. "I HAVE HEARD HIM SPEAK OF YOU."

"YOUR NAME SOUNDS LIKE A SUMERIAN NAME," I SAID TO THE TUTOR.

"IT IS," HE REPLIED.

"HE COMES OF A HIGHLY DISTINGUISHED OLD SUMERIAN FAMILY," THE KING SAID. "WE ARE VERY FORTUNATE TO HAVE HIM AS MY GRANDSON'S TUTOR."

THE ATTENDANTS SET A TABLE BEFORE US, AND BROUGHT IN FOOD. THE KING MADE US BE SEATED, AND MAKE OURSELVES AT EASE.

IT WAS NOT A LUXURIOUS MEAL. THE FOOD WAS PLAIN, BUT WELL PREPARED AND DELICIOUS. THERE WAS ONE DISH OF MEAT, ONE OF FISH, VEGETABLES AND FRUIT, BREAD AND A LIGHT WINE. DANIEL AND I CHOSE THE FISH. I FELT GREATLY HONORED TO DINE AT THE KING'S TABLE.

AFTER THE MEAL WAS CONCLUDED AND THE TABLE CLEARED, THE ATTENDANTS WITHDREW. NEDUCHADREZZAR ADDRESSED ME.

"DO YOU HEAR YOU HAVE A BROTHER LIVING AWAY UP NORTH SOMEWHERE, BEYOND URARTI," HE SAID.

"WELL, NOT EXACTLY A BROTHER, BUT A COUSIN," I SAID. "HABAN. IS MY COUSIN, AND IS MARRIED TO MY SISTER."

"HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO UP THERE AND VISIT YOUR KIN?"

"I SHALL BE GLAD TO GO WHEREVER YOUR MAJESTY MAY SEE FIT TO SEND ME," I SAID. "AND I WOULD LIKE TO SEE MY SISTER AGAIN, AND THIS COUSIN. HE AND I WERE LIKE BROTHERS IN OUR BOYHOOD."

"I HAVE A MOTIVE IN THIS," THE KING SAID. "YOU KNOW WE HAVE AN ARMY DIVISION STATIONED IN URARTI. WE NEED TO KEEP A STRONG MILITARY PRESENCE IN THAT AREA ON ACCOUNT OF THE NEIGHBORS. OF COURSE THE ARMY HAS A GOOD INTELLIGENCE SERVICE, THEY PRETTY WELL KEEP UP WITH WHAT IS GOING ON. BUT I THOUGHT IF YOU COULD FIND THIS KINSMAN OF YOURS IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HE MAY BE IN TOUCH WITH ELEMENTS OF THE POPULATION OF THE REGION THAT MAY BE USEFUL TO US. YOU WOULD GO IN AN UNOFFICIAL CAPACITY, BUT I AM SURE WE CAN RELY ON YOU TO KEEP YOUR EYES AND EARS OPEN. WE WOULD SEND ENOUGH MEN WITH YOU TO ASSURE PROTECTION — CONDITIONS UP THERE ARE UNSETTLED, I KNOW."

"DO YOU HAVE ANY CERTAIN TIME IN MIND? WHEN WOULD I BE GOING, AND HOW LONG WOULD I BE EXPECTED TO STAY?"

"I WOULD SAY GO AS SOON AS EVERYTHING CAN BE MADE READY," THE KING SAID. "AND AS TO HOW LONG, THAT WOULD BE UP TO YOU. USE YOUR OWN JUDGMENT, ACCORDING TO WHAT YOU FIND UP THERE."

"I THINK THAT WOULD BE VERY INTERESTING, AND PERHAPS I COULD GATHER SOME USEFUL INFORMATION. WHAT ABOUT TAKING MY FAMILY WITH ME?"

"BY ALL MEANS TAKE THEM ALONG. THEN YOU WON'T NEED TO BE IN SUCH A HURRY TO GET BACK. THEY MAY FIND IT PRETTY RUGGED, BUT THE EXPERIENCE SHOULD BE GOOD FOR THEM." HE SAT IN THOUGHT FOR A FEW MINUTES. WE WAITED IN SILENCE. THEN HE WENT ON: "I REALLY HAD A DOUBLE MOTIVE IN THIS. I'VE BEEN PROMISING NERGI HERE — HE INDICATED THE LITTLE PRINCE; APPARENTLY 'NERGI' WAS HIS PET NAME FOR NERGAL-SHAREZER — AN ADVENTURE IN SOME WILD MOUNTAIN COUNTRY, AND THAT COULD BE WILD ENOUGH FOR HIM. HIS FATHER, EVIL-MAROUK, IS IN URARTI WITH THE ARMY. NERGI COULD GO WITH YOUR PARTY, VISIT HIS FATHER, AND GO UP WITH YOU TO FIND YOUR KIN IF HE STILL WANTS TO. WHAT AGES ARE YOUR CHILDREN?"

"I HAVE A BOY ALMOST TEN, A GIRL EIGHT, AND A BOY SIX YEARS OLD."

"WHAT ABOUT IT, NERGI?" THE KING SAID, GIVING THE BOY A FRIENDLY SHANK. "THIS TRIP MAY BE PRETTY ROUGH. DO YOU THINK YOU CAN TAKE IT?"

"OH, I WOULD LOVE IT, GRANDFATHER. I THINK IT WOULD BE SUPER."

"AND YOUR TUTOR WOULD GO ALONG, TO MAKE SURE YOU DIDN'T GET BEHIND IN YOUR STUDIES."

NERGAL-SHAREZER MADE NO OBJECTION TO THAT. APPARENTLY HE WAS VERY FOND OF HIS TUTOR. AND ADDASHAGGA EXPRESSED HIS ENTIRE WILLINGNESS, EVEN EAGERNESS TO GO.

WE TALKED OVER PLANS FOR A WHILE. DANIEL HAD HAD LITTLE TO SAY IN ALL THIS, BUT WHEN IT CAME TO DISCUSSING PLANS, HE HAD SOME VALUABLE SUGGESTIONS.

"WELL, JERUSHA," I SAID ON REACHING HOME, "IT LOOKS LIKE YOU ARE GOING TO GET THOSE MOUNTAINS YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT."

"OH, REALLY? WHERE?"

"AWAY UP IN ARMINA, WHEREVER THAT IS. AND IF ALL GOES AS PLANNED, WE WILL GET TO SEE YOUR BROTHER AGAIN -- AND MY SISTER, TOO. HANANI TALKED ABOUT MOUNT ARARAT, AND THAT OUGHT TO BE MOUNTAIN ENOUGH TO SATISFY YOU."

SHE WAS ECSTATIC. THE CHILDREN CAME IN FROM SCHOOL AND FOUND US DANCING AROUND, HUGGING EACH OTHER AND SAYING, "MOUNTAINS! MOUNTAINS!"

THEN THE CHILDREN HAD TO HEAR ABOUT THE PROJECTED TRIP, AND THEY WERE ALL EXCITED AT THE PROSPECT. AND WHEN I TOLD THEM ABOUT THE LITTLE PRINCE WHO WOULD BE GOING WITH US, THEY WERE MORE EAGER THAN EVER.

"WHEN DO WE START?" YESHUA ASKED. "CAN WE GO TOMORROW?"

"THEN I WON'T HAVE TO GO TO SCHOOL TOMORROW. WHOOPEE!" MAHLAH SAID.

"NOT SO FAST," I SAID. "IT WILL TAKE SOME TIME TO GET READY. SO GO ON AND DO YOUR HOME WORK. YOU'LL HAVE SCHOOL FOR A WHILE YET."

AND IN FACT IT TOOK EVEN LONGER THAN WE HAD THOUGHT. THAT WAS IN THE SPRING, AND I THOUGHT WE WOULD BE STARTING SOON, AND I HAD VISIONS OF REACHING HANANI'S HOUSE BEFORE WINTER. BUT THERE WERE MANY DETAILS TO BE WORKED OUT. FOR ONE THING, IT WAS DECIDED THAT OUR PARTY SHOULD GO ALONG WITH A CARAVAN OF WAGONS LOADED WITH PROVISIONS FOR THE ARMY BASE IN URARTI. THAT COULD NOT BE ARRANGED OVERNIGHT. IT WAS MID SUMMER BEFORE WE GOT AWAY.

BUT WE DID GET STARTED AT LAST. WE WERE FURNISHED MULES TO RIDE, ALL EXCEPT MAHLAH AND JOAB, WHO WERE MOUNTED ON GENTLE SHE-ASSES. AND WE HAD ASSES FOR OUR BAGGAGE. OUR PARTY KEPT WELL AHEAD OF THE WAGON TRAIN, SO THAT DUST WAS NO PROBLEM FOR US. TWO OF THE SOLDIERS RODE WITH OUR PARTY, AS ADVANCE SCOUTS FOR THE WAGON TRAIN. THEY WOULD SELECT THE PLACE FOR OUR CAMP, AND WE WOULD HAVE TIME TO REST FOR TWO OR THREE HOURS BEFORE THE WAGONS CAUGHT UP.

WE FOLLOWED THE COURSE OF THE TIGRIS FOR A LONG WAY. AT FIRST IT WAS ALL SETTLED COUNTRY, WITH MANY CITIES AND TOWNS. WE BY-PASSED NINEVEH -- "NINEVEH, THAT GREAT CITY, WHEREIN ARE MORE THAN SIX SCORE THOUSAND PERSONS THAT CANNOT DISCERN BETWEEN THEIR RIGHT HAND AND THEIR LEFT HAND, AND ALSO MUCH CATTLE". I TOLD THEM THE STORY OF JONAH, AND HIS EXPEDITION TO NINEVEH.

"MY MOTHER GREW UP IN NINEVEH," NERGI SAID. "BUT I CAN'T REMEMBER HEARING HER TELL ANYTHING ABOUT THAT."

"IT HAPPENED LONG BEFORE HER TIME," I SAID. "IT WAS OVER TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO."

ADDASHAGGA GAVE US A LONG LECTURE ABOUT THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE, AND ITS OVERTHROW BY NABO-POLASSAR -- "YOUR GREAT GRANDFATHER," HE SAID TO NERGI.

"YES, I KNOW ABOUT THAT," NERGI SAID.

"SO DO I," SAID YESHUA. "WE STUDIED IT IN OUR HISTORY CLASS."

IT WAS THE TIME OF WHEAT HARVEST. ADDASHAGGA WAS AN AVID HUNTER. EACH DAY AS WE WAITED FOR THE WAGON TRAIN TO REACH THE CAMP SITE HE WOULD TAKE THE CHILDREN TO LIE IN WAIT BY THE FIELDS FOR WATERFOWL OR DUSTARDS. NERGI AND YESHUA HAD LIGHT BOWS AND ARROWS, AS WELL AS SLINGS.

MAHLAH AND JOAB WERE TOO SHALL FOR ANY KIND OF SHOOTING, BUT WERE QUICK TO RUN AND SEIZE A BIRD THAT WAS SHOT DOWN. WE OFTEN FEASTED ON THE FLESH OF THESE FOWL. NERGI ENJOINED HIMSELF WITH GLORY BY BRINGING DOWN A GREAT DUSTARD IN FLIGHT -- ADMITTEDLY A LUCKY SHOT, BUT HE WAS GETTING TO BE QUITE GOOD AT IT.

ABBASHAGGA WAS ALWAYS WATCHING FOR GAZELLES -- MASH-DU, HE CALLED THEM, THE OLD SUMERIAN TERM. IN ARAMAIC WE CALLED THEM TABIYHA, OR IN HEDREW TSADIYYA. SEVERAL TIMES HE WAS SUCCESSFUL IN GETTING ONE.

WHEN WE LEFT THE TIGRIS AND BEGAN TO GET UP INTO THE HILL COUNTRY WE NO LONGER FOUND THE WELL KEPT ROADS TO WHICH WE HAD BEEN ACCUSTOMED. WHAT LITTLE ROAD THERE WAS HAD BEEN DAMAGED IN SOME PLACES BY FLASH FLOODS, AND CROSSING SOME OF THE STREAM BEDS PROVED A SERIOUS PROBLEM FOR THE WAGONS. THAT SLOWED OUR PROGRESS A GOOD DEAL. IT GAVE ABBASHAGGA MORE OPPORTUNITY TO HUNT, AND THE BOYS WERE PLEASED AT THAT. BUT WE WERE WARNED TO GO ALWAYS ARMED, AS THERE MIGHT WELL BE BANDITS AMONG THE HILLS. WE WERE NEVER ATTACKED, BUT ALWAYS FELT THE NEED TO BE WATCHFUL.

AUTUMN WAS WELL ADVANCED BY THE TIME WE REACHED THE ARMY BASE. AT THAT ELEVATION THERE WAS ALREADY HARD ICE IN THE MORNINGS. WE WERE STRONGLY ADVISED NOT TO TRY TO GO FARTHER, BUT TO SPEND THE WINTER THERE.

"WHAT ABOUT SNOW, UP AHEAD?" I ASKED.

"NOT MUCH SNOW, AS A RULE, BUT THE COLD IS FRIGHTFUL, AND THE WIND MAKES TRAVEL VERY PRECARIOUS. AND SOMETIMES THERE ARE SEVERE BLIZZARDS."

SINCE WE WERE UNCERTAIN EVEN OF OUR DESTINATION WE DECIDED TO ACCEPT THEIR OFFER OF QUARTERS ON THE POST FOR THE WINTER.

NERGI WAS HAPPY TO SEE HIS FATHER AGAIN, AND THE FATHER WAS GLAD TO SEE HIM. NERGI'S MOTHER HAD DIED IN CHILDHOOD TWO YEARS BEFORE, WE LEARNED, AND EVIL-MARDUK HAD A NEW WIFE -- NO CHILDREN BY HER YET.

OUR QUARTERS WERE AS COMFORTABLE AS THEY COULD BE MADE IN THAT SEVERE CLIMATE. WE HAD COME WELL PROVIDED WITH WARM CLOTHING, BUT THE BEST WE COULD DO IT WAS A STRENUOUS TIME.

NERGI LIVED WITH US, NOT WITH HIS FATHER AND STEP-MOTHER. AND ABBASHAGGA STAYED WITH US TOO. HE SET UP A REGULAR SCHOOL FOR THE CHILDREN, AND THERE WERE SEVERAL CHILDREN OF OFFICERS WHO WERE GLAD TO BE INCLUDED IN THE SCHOOL. AT LEAST THEIR PARENTS WERE GLAD; AND IN SPITE OF SOME CRUMBLING, I THINK THE CHILDREN REALLY ENJOYED IT. ABBASHAGGA WAS A BORN TEACHER. HE HAD A WEALTH OF INFORMATION ABOUT ANCIENT TIMES, AND ENTERTAINED US ALL WITH STORIES ABOUT UR AND ERECH, ABOUT HAMMURABI, THE LAW-GIVER, AND GUDEA, ABOUT NAKAM SIN AND HIS CONQUESTS, ABOUT SHULGI, BUR SIN AND GIMIL SIN, KINGS OF UR, AND ABOUT EOLA AND THE HITTITES.

I ENJOYED RENEWING MY FRIENDSHIP WITH EVIL-MARDUK, AND WE HAD MANY A LONG TALK ON THOSE WINTER EVENINGS. JERUSHA MADE FRIENDS WITH THE WIVES OF THE OFFICERS. TIME PASSED, AND SPRING CAME AT LAST.

IN EARLY SUMMER WE SET OUT. NERGI WENT WITH US, OF COURSE. HE SEEMED TO FEEL LIKE PART OF OUR FAMILY BY THIS TIME. AND NATURALLY, ABBASHAGGA WENT TOO. EVIL-MARDUK INSISTED ON SENDING A SQUAD OF SOLDIERS WITH US FOR PROTECTION; THE OFFICER IN CHARGE HAD SOME SLIGHT KNOWLEDGE OF THE AREA WHERE WE WERE GOING. WE ANTICIPATED THAT WE MIGHT WELL HAVE LANGUAGE PROBLEMS, AND PERHAPS HOSTILE ACTIONS.

AS WE GOT FARTHER INTO THE MOUNTAINS WE ENCOUNTERED A FEW TRIBESMEN, AND APPROACHED THEM WARILY. TRIED ALL THE LANGUAGES ANY OF US KNEW, AND DID AT LEAST GET THE IDEA ACROSS THAT WE WERE ON A PEACEFUL MISSION.

HANANI HAD GIVEN ME SOME PEACEFUL DIRECTIONS, YEARS BEFORE -- "PASS LAKE SEVAN, (WE WERE ABLE TO IDENTIFY THAT) GO NORTH TILL YOU REACH A RIVER, CROSS THAT AND TURN EAST. AS SOON AS YOU CAN SEE THE SNOW-CLOAD PEAKS OF ARARAT AT SUNSET, TURN NORTH, AND TWO OR THREE DAYS JOURNEY NORTH, I GET YOU TO THE PLACE." FOLLOWING THOSE DIRECTIONS AND SOME SIGN LANGUAGE OF TRIBESMEN, WE FOUND THE PLACE AT LAST.

IT WAS A HAPPY REUNION. HANANI HAD DONE WELL IN THE PLACE. HE LEARNED THAT AT HIS FIRST COMING HE HAD HAD OPPORTUNITY TO SAVE THE LIFE OF THE CHIEF OF THE TRIBE, WHO WERE KNOWN AS THE KARITES. THE CHIEF HAD NO SON, ONLY A YOUNG DAUGHTER. HANANI WAS THOUGHT OF AS THE SON OF THE CHIEF, AND WAS WELL ACCEPTED BY THE TRIBESMEN. HE HAD BUILT A NICE HOME, HAD EXTENSIVE HERDS AND FLOCKS. TAMAR SEEMED HAPPY. WAS THE MOTHER OF TWO BOYS AND TWO GIRLS, THE ELDEST ABOUT YESHUA'S AGE, NAMED JOAB. (IN OUR BOYHOOD, HANANI AND I HAD READ OF THE EXPLOITS OF THE MIGHTY WARRIOR JOAB, IN KING DAVID'S TIME, AND HAD EACH DECIDED TO NAME A SON JOAB.) WE CAME TO REFER TO THE TWO AS BIG JOAB AND LITTLE JOAB.

THE DANITE FAMILIES LIVED NEARBY, AND HAD A NUMEROUS BROOD. ALL TOGETHER IT MADE A FAIRLY RESPECTABLE VILLAGE. ONE OF THE DANITE MEN WAS A SMITH, ANOTHER HAD SET UP A STORE, WHERE HE OFFERED FOR SALE OR BARTER SUCH GOODS AS TRAVELING MERCHANTS OCCASIONALLY BROUGHT TO EXCHANGE FOR WOOL, HIDES, BEESWAX, AND OTHER PRODUCTS OF THE REGION. THE CHIEF'S HOUSE WAS NOT FAR AWAY, ABOUT AN HOUR'S RIDE.

THE KARITES WERE A BLUE-EYED, FAIR-HAIRED PEOPLE, KEPT SHEEP, GOATS AND CATTLE, AND BRED VERY GOOD HORSES AND ASSES. THERE WERE SEVERAL THOUSAND OF THEM, WE WERE TOLD, SCATTERED OVER A WIDE AREA. THEY COULD BE A USEFUL ALLY, WORTH CULTIVATING, A BASTION AGAINST THE HURRIAN TRIBES TO THE NORTH, TOWARD THE EUXINE SEA. THEY MIGHT WELL SERVE TO DETER ANY INVASIONS OF THE MEDES, TO THE SOUTHEAST. BUT THE MEDES JUST THEN WERE QUIET, THEY TOLD US, BUSY FIGHTING THE PERSIANS TO THE SOUTH OF THEM.

WE DISMISSED THE SOLDIERS, ASSURING THEM THAT WITH FRIENDLY RELATIONS ESTABLISHED WITH THE KARITES, WE WOULD NO LONGER NEED THEIR PROTECTION. WE HAD THOUGHT OF GOING BACK AFTER A SHORT VISIT, BUT THE CHILDREN BEGGED TO BE ALLOWED TO STAY THROUGH THE WINTER, AND REALLY GET ACQUAINTED WITH THEIR COUSINS. NERFI, TOO, WAS EAGER TO STAY. HE HAD A SPECIAL INTEREST.

A FEW DAYS AFTER OUR ARRIVAL A GIRL CAME RIDING UP ON A BEAUTIFUL MARE. THE GIRL COULD NOT HAVE BEEN OVER TEN YEARS OLD, BUT WAS QUITE SELF-ASSURED AND UNAFRAID OF THE STRANGERS. OF COURSE HANANI HAD LEARNED TO SPEAK THE TRIBAL LANGUAGE, WHICH I FOUND TO BE DISTANTLY RELATED TO GREEK. I WAS OUTSIDE WITH YESHUA AND NERGI AND HANANI'S SON JOAB WHEN THE GIRL ARRIVED. SHE DISMOUNTED, AND STOOD FACING US, A BEAUTIFUL CHILD, WITH GOLDEN CURLS.

NERGI SPOKE FIRST. "WHAT IS YOUR NAME?" HE SAID.

SHE MUST HAVE GUESSED HIS MEANING, FOR SHE ANSWERED WITHOUT WAITING FOR A TRANSLATION, "NITOCRIS".

"I AM THE GRANDSON OF KING NEBUCHADREZZAR," NERGI SAID. "AND I SHALL BE KING SOME DAY. AND WHEN I AM OLD ENOUGH I AM GOING TO MARRY YOU."

PERHAPS SHE HAD GUESSED THE MEANING OF THIS TOO. CERTAINLY THE NAME OF THE GREAT KING WAS KNOWN TO HER, BUT NOW IT WAS ISOLATED.

NITOCRIS DID NOT EXPRESS ANY SURPRISE. SHE SAID, AND JOAB TRANSLATED, "YOU WILL HAVE TO TALK TO MY FATHER ABOUT THAT."

NERGI SEEMED TO FEEL THAT, AS FAVORITE GRANDSON OF THE KING, HE COULD HAVE ANYTHING HE WANTED. AND HE WAS PERFECTLY SERIOUS ABOUT THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS INTENT.

SO WE ENDED UP BY STAYING THROUGH THE LONG, SEVERE WINTER. ABBASHAGGA ORGANIZED A SCHOOL, AND TAUGHT ALL THE CHILDREN AVAILABLE, INCLUDING NITOCRIS, WHO CAME EVERY DAY ON HORSEBACK, EVEN IN THE WORST WEATHER. SHE NEVER MISSED A DAY. SHE LEARNED TO SPEAK ARAMAIC, AND ALL OF US LEARNED SOMETHING OF THE KARIAN TONGUE. HANANI'S CHILDREN HAD HAD LITTLE INSTRUCTION IN READING AND WRITING, AND THOSE OF THE DANITES NONE AT ALL. THEY ALL LEARNED A GREAT DEAL.

FOR ONE THING, THEY ALL LEARNED SOMETHING OF DISCIPLINE. ABBASHAGGA REQUIRED STRICT OBEDIENCE. THE KING'S GRANDSON ALREADY KNEW THIS, AND HE FARED NO BETTER THAN THE OTHERS. NITOCRIS HAD ALWAYS HAD HER OWN WAY, AND WAS RELUCTANT TO SUBMIT TO RULES. ONE DAY, WHEN SHE WAS GUILTY OF A FLAGRANT ACT OF DISOBEDIENCE, ABBASHAGGA SEIZED HER, TURNED HER ACROSS HIS LAP, AND REMOVING HER HEAVY OUTER CLOTHING, SPANKED HER SOUNDLY. SHE WAS FURIOUS, BUT DID NOT STOP COMING TO SCHOOL. AND FROM THAT DAY ON, SHE WAS NEVER OPENLY DISOBEDIENT.

SPRING CAME AT LAST, AND TIME FOR US TO DEPART. WE SAID GOOD-BYE TO OUR KIN, WHOM WE WOULD NEVER SEE AGAIN, AND TO THE CHIEF, AND TO NITOCRIS, WHOM WE WOULD SEE AGAIN. NERGI TOLD HER THAT HE WOULD COME FOR HER SOME DAY, AND WE ALL ACCEPTED THE FACT THAT HE WAS FIRMLY RESOLVED TO DO THIS. THE KARITES SENT SOME MEN TO SEE US SAFELY BACK TO URARTI, WHERE WE JOINED A CARAVAN GOING TO THE CAPITAL.

EZEKIEL'S STEW

IT WAS LATE SUMMER WHEN WE ARRIVED IN THE GREAT CITY, AND AFTER LEAVING THE MOUNTAIN REGION WE WERE ALMOST PROSTRATED BY THE INTENSE HEAT. WE HAD GIVEN UP OUR HOUSE BEFORE LEAVING, AND STORED OUR FURNITURE. WE DECIDED TO MAKE A VISIT TO CHEBAR, WHILE SAMUEL PROMISED TO FIND ANOTHER HOUSE FOR US, AND HAVE OUR FURNITURE PUT IN IT.

THERE WAS A SURPRISE AWAITING US IN CHEBAR -- MORE THAN ONE, IN FACT. WE WENT TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE -- HE HAD BUILT A MUCH BETTER HOUSE, ALMOVED FROM HIS SHOP -- AND THE FIRST PERSON I MET WAS A YOUNG MAN WITH A GREAT DUSHY BEARD.

"JO-ZADDAK!" HE CRIED. "I'D HAVE KNOWN YOU ANYWHERE!"

I WOULD NEVER HAVE RECOGNIZED THE FACE, BUT SOMETHING ABOUT THE VOICE CLICKED IN MY MIND. "YOU MUST BE MY BROTHER SHIMEATH," I SAID.

INDEED IT WAS. HE HAD BEEN ONLY TEN YEARS OLD WHEN I HAD LAST SEEN HIM, OVER SIXTEEN YEARS AGO.

"HOW DID YOU GET HERE?" I ASKED. "AND WHAT ABOUT MOTHER?"

"MOTHER IS HERE," HE SAID.

BY THIS TIME JERUSHA AND THE CHILDREN WERE DISMOUNTING, AND PEOPLE WERE SWARMING OUT OF THE HOUSE LIKE BEES. MOTHER RAN TO EMBRACE ME, AND JERUSHA, AND THE GRANDCHILDREN. MOTHER LOOKED VERY MUCH AS I REMEMBERED HER, EXCEPT OLDER. THEN THERE CAME A YOUNG WOMAN WITH A BABY IN HER ARMS, AND A TODDLER BY HER SIDE, WHO TURNED OUT TO BE MY LITTLE SISTER JEDIDA. AMIEL, HER HUSBAND, FOLLOWED, THEN INLAH, SHIMEATH'S WIFE, AND THEIR TWO BOYS, UZZI AND HILKIAH, AGED ABOUT FIVE AND THREE. LAST OF ALL MY HALF-SISTER TIRZAH, NOW THIRTEEN YEARS OLD, AND GROWING INTO A VERY PRETTY GIRL. SHE CAME WIPING HER HANDS ON HER APRON. IT HAD BEEN ABOUT FOUR YEARS SINCE WE HAD VISITED CHEDAR, AND THERE WAS MUCH TO CATCH UP ON, BESIDES THE FACT OF MOTHER'S ARRIVAL.

I MISSED SEEING MY STEP-MOTHER. "WHAT ABOUT YOUR MOTHER, TIRZAH?" I ASKED.

"SHE HAS BEEN DEAD ALMOST A YEAR," SHE ANSWERED. "AND AFTER HER DEATH MY BROTHERS WENT TO STAY WITH AN UNCLE. I'VE BEEN KEEPING HOUSE TILL..... SHE GAVE A GESTURE INDICATING THE PRESENCE OF THE OTHERS.

THAT SOLVED ONE PROBLEM, ANYWAY, I THOUGHT. BUT I HAD TO HEAR THE STORY OF HOW THEY HAPPENED TO COME AT THIS TIME.

THEY HAD NOT COME ALONE. A GROUP OF 745 HAD PETITIONED THE COMMANDER OF THE OCCUPATION FORCES, NEBU-ZAR-ADDAN, TO SEND THEM TO JOIN THEIR KINDRED IN SHINAR. AFTER THE MURDER OF GEDALIAH, AND THE FLIGHT OF MANY OF THE SURVIVORS TO EGYPT, CONDITIONS HAD BECOME SO CHAOTIC THAT IT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE TO LIVE IN ANY SORT OF SECURITY.

"WE LEARNED THAT SOME SOLDIERS WERE GOING, AND I WENT PERSONALLY TO NEBU-ZAR-ADDAN AND ASKED TO GO UNDER THEIR PROTECTION. ALL THOSE OTHERS JOINED WITH ME IN THE PETITION," MOTHER SAID. "HE WAS VERY NICE ABOUT IT, HE KNEW HOW THINGS WERE, AND WE WERE VERY WELL TREATED ON THE WAY. THE NUMBER INCREASED SOME," SHE SAID LAUGHING. "THIS LITTLE GIRL -- SHE POINTED TO JEDIDA'S BABY -- WAS BORN ON THE WAY. WE HAVE BEEN HERE ONLY ABOUT A WEEK."

"WERE YOU IN JERUSALEM?" I ASKED. "AND WHAT IS IT LIKE THERE NOW?"

"OH, NO," SHE SAID. "WE WERE IN ANATHOTH. YOU KNOW WE HAD A LITTLE PROPERTY THERE, AND AFTER THE FALL OF THE CITY WE MANAGED TO GET THERE, AND EKE OUT A SORT OF EXISTENCE. BUT IT WAS TERRIBLE, ROGERS EVERYWHERE. SOME SOLDIERS WERE STATIONED IN ANATHOTH AND TRIED TO KEEP ORDER. WE HELD ON AS LONG AS WE COULD, BUT WE WERE GLAD TO TAKE THIS CHANCE TO GET AWAY."

"JERUSALEM IS NOTHING BUT RUINS," SHIMEATH SPOKE UP. "I WAS THERE BACK IN THE SPRING. THERE ARE A FEW PEOPLE LIVING IN MAKESHIFT SHELTERS, BUT RATS ARE EVERYWHERE, AND SNAKES! IT'S FUNNY HOW RATS CAN MULTIPLY SO QUICKLY. DURING THE SIEGE THERE WAS NOT A RAT TO BE FOUND IN THE CITY NOW....."

"DID YOU EAT RATS?" I SAID, AGHAST AT THE THOUGHT.

"I'LL SAY WE DID!" SHIMEATH SAID. "WE FORGOT ALL OUR SCRUPLES AT THAT POINT. ALL WE THOUGHT OF WAS SURVIVAL. THE DOGS WENT FIRST, AFTER THE HORSES AND ASSES, THEN THE CATS, AND THEN WE HUNTED THE RATS LIKE LOOKING FOR GOLD. BUT WE DID SURVIVE."

"IT WAS A HORRIBLE THING," MOTHER SAID. "SOME PEOPLE EVEN ATE HUMAN FLESH, I WAS TOLD. I NEVER KNEW A CASE OF IT, BUT IT MAY WELL HAVE BEEN TRUE. AND WHEN THE CITY WAS TAKEN THERE WAS SO MUCH SLAUGHTER AND BLOOD. SHE SHUDDERED AT THE RECOLLECTION OF IT.

I SAW FATHER COMING. IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON, TIME TO CLOSE THE SHOP. AND THERE WAS A BOY WITH HIM. FATHER SAW ME LOOKING.

"AND I HAVE A SURPRISE," HE SAID AS THEY CAME IN. "THIS IS YOUR BROTHER JERHAM."

"BROTHER?" I SAID. "YOU MEAN HALF BROTHER?"

"YOUR FULL BROTHER. I SUSPECTED THAT I WAS WITH CHILD WHEN YOU LEFT, BUT DID NOT MENTION IT TO YOUR FATHER. I THOUGHT HE HAD ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT WITHOUT THAT."

THAT REALLY WAS A SURPRISE. JERHAM LOOKED TO BE ABOUT FIFTEEN. THEN HE HAD TO BE INTRODUCED TO OUR CHILDREN. AND OF COURSE I HAD TO GREET MY FATHER, AND CONGRATULATE HIM.

AND BY THE TIME ALL THAT WAS DONE, TIRZAH CAME OUT AND ANNOUNCED THAT SUPPER WAS READY. I COULD SEE THAT SHE WAS VERY PROUD OF HER HOUSEKEEPING ABILITY. SHE HAD A RIGHT TO BE. FIVE UNEXPECTED GUESTS HAD COME IN, AND IN LESS THAN AN HOUR SHE HAD A GOOD MEAL READY FOR THEM ALL. SHE SAID SHE HAD HASTILY STIRRED UP SOME UNLEAVENED BREAD AND PUT TO BAKE, AND HAD ADDED WATER TO THE SOUP. ANYWAY IT WAS ENOUGH, AND GOOD. FATHER BROUGHT OUT A BOTTLE OF WINE, TO MAKE IT FESTIVE. WE WERE ALL VERY HAPPY TO HAVE THE FAMILY REUNITED, AFTER ALL HOPE OF IT SEEMED TO BE LOST.

WE STAYED TEN DAYS IN CHEBAR. WE HAD TO VISIT JERUSHA'S FATHER TOO, AND WE HAD A LONG STORY TO TELL ABOUT OUR JOURNEY INTO THE MOUNTAIN COUNTRY, AND ABOUT THE PRINCE, AND ABBASHAGGA, AND ABOUT HANANI AND TAMAR AND THEIR FAMILY — EVEN ABOUT NITOCRIS, WHO HAD BEEN IN OUR HOME SO MUCH THAT WE HAD COME TO THINK OF HER AS PART OF OUR FAMILY.

"THE PRINCE?" TIRZAH EXCLAIMED. "YOU MEAN THE KING'S SON?"

"HIS GRANDSON," I EXPLAINED. "HIS FATHER IS NOT THE CROWN PRINCE, BUT THE KING DOTES ON THIS GRANDSON. NERGAL-SHAREZER — WE LEARNED TO CALL HIM NERGI — INSISTS THAT HE WILL BE KING SOME DAY, AND IT MAY TURN OUT SO. WE BECAME VERY FOND OF HIM. SOMETIMES HE MADE A FUSS WHEN HE DID NOT GET HIS OWN WAY, BUT IN THE MAIN HE DID VERY WELL."

SHIMEATH AND AMIEL SOON FOUND EMPLOYMENT IN THE RAPIDLY GROWING TOWN, ALMOST CITY, OF CHEBAR. FATHER TOLD ME THAT HE WAS STARTING JERHAM AS AN APPRENTICE IN HIS SHOP, AND IT LOOKED LIKE HE MIGHT HAVE SOME GIFT FOR THAT SORT OF WORK. IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN A DISAPPOINTMENT TO FATHER THAT I HAD NOT BEEN ABLE TO FOLLOW HIM, BUT SINCE I HAD ATTAINED SOME SUCCESS IN ANOTHER FIELD, HE WAS CONSOLED. BUT NOW IF THIS YOUNGEST SON COULD TAKE UP HIS WORK IT WOULD BE A JOY TO HIM.

I WENT TO VISIT EZEKIEL. HE WAS VERY MUCH DISTURBED AT THE CONDUCT OF OUR PEOPLE. THEY DON'T TAKE THE LAW VERY SERIOUSLY," HE SAID.

"IN WHAT WAY?"

"OH, THEY DON'T EAT PIGS," HE SAID. "BUT THEY ARE SO EAGER TO GET RICH, THEY CHEAT ONE ANOTHER, AND CHARGE INTEREST ON LOANS, WHICH IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN, AS YOU KNOW. AND THERE IS A LOT OF ADULTERY. BUT THE WORST THING IS THAT MANY OF THEM ARE FORSAKING YAHWEH, AND WORSHIPPING THE GODS OF THESE PEOPLE. THEY EXPECT YAHWEH TO SAVE THEM, BUT THEY MAKE VERY LITTLE EFFORT TO KEEP HIS LAW. I KEEP PREACHING TO THEM, BUT IT ALL GOES IN AT ONE EAR AND OUT AT THE OTHER."

"WHAT ABOUT OBSERVING THE SABBATH?"

"THAT'S ANOTHER THING. SOME OF THEM DO COME TO OUR SABBATH GATHERINGS, BUT EVEN THOSE, MOST OF THEM GO RIGHT OUT AND CARRY ON THEIR BUSINESS ON THE SABBATH DAY. HOW CAN THEY EXPECT YAHWEH TO HELP THEM WHEN THEY OPENLY FLOUT HIS LAW? THEY ARE ROTTEN INSIDE, AND NO AMOUNT OF OUTWARD EXPRESSION OF RELIGION CAN MEAN ANYTHING, WHILE THEIR HEARTS ARE FULL OF FILTH."

EZEKIEL WAS CERTAINLY AN EXTREMIST. SOME PEOPLE SAID HE WAS CRAZY. I WONDERED IF THINGS WERE AS BAD AS HE SEEMED TO THINK. BUT I DID KNOW THAT A GOOD MANY OF OUR PEOPLE, THROUGH SUPERSTITIOUS FEAR, SACRIFICED TO THE GODS OF BAB-EL. EZEKIEL MIGHT BE AN EXTREMIST, BUT THERE WAS NO DOUBTING HIS SINCERITY. AND BEYOND ANY DOUBT, HE WAS REALLY A PROPHET, EVEN IF HE DID DO SOME VERY PECULIAR THINGS. CERTAINLY IT WAS DUE MAINLY TO HIS INFLUENCE THAT THE PEOPLE HAD BEGUN THE CUSTOM OF GATHERING FOR WORSHIP AND READING THE SACRED BOOKS. I KNEW THAT THIS CUSTOM WAS BECOMING WIDESPREAD, NOT ONLY IN CHEDAR, BUT IN BAB-EL, AND WHEREVER SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF OUR PEOPLE LIVED. HOWEVER STRANGELY HE ACTED, EZEKIEL DESERVED A LOT OF CREDIT, I THOUGHT.

AND HE DESERVED MATERIAL SUPPORT TOO. I WONDERED HOW HE MANAGED TO LIVE. AFTER I LEFT HIM THAT DAY I PASSED BY THE MARKET AND SAW A NICE LAMB THAT WAS JUST BEING DRESSED. I BOUGHT IT, AND ORDERED IT SENT TO EZEKIEL'S HOUSE.

THE NEXT DAY AN INVITATION CAME FOR ME AND MY FAMILY TO DINE AT EZEKIEL'S HOUSE. HIS DAUGHTER HANNAH WAS KEEPING HOUSE FOR HIM, WITH HER HUSBAND AND TWO YOUNG CHILDREN. AFTER OUR MEAL WE SAT IN CONVERSATION. MAHLAH AND JOAB AND THE TWO LITTLE ONES WERE PLAYING OUTSIDE, BUT YESHUA, BEING MORE SERIOUS MINDED, STAYED TO LISTEN TO THE TALK OF HIS ELDERS.

HANNAH THANKED ME FOR THE GIFT OF THE LAMB, WHICH WE HAD ENJOYED.

"IT MADE ME REMEMBER ANOTHER LAMB, A FEW YEARS AGO. IT WAS WHILE WE WERE WAITING FOR NEWS OF THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM. FATHER HAD ANNOUNCED THAT THE SIEGE HAD ALREADY BEGUN, AND COULD END ONLY ONE WAY, BUT MOST PEOPLE REFUSED TO BELIEVE IT.

"ANYWAY, FATHER BUILT A FIRE OUT IN THE YARD, WHERE ALL THE ELDERS WERE GATHERED, AND HE BUTCHERED THIS LAMB AND STARTED PUTTING THE PIECES IN AN OLD COPPER POT. THE MEAT LOOKED SO GOOD IT MADE MY MOUTH WATER, BUT I WAS HORRIFIED WHEN I SAW WHAT HE WAS DOING. THE POT WAS DIRTY TO BEGIN WITH, AND HE PURPOSELY DID NOT WASH IT. HE PUT IN THE NICE CHUNKS OF MEAT, THEN HE PUT IN THE ENTRAILS, DUNG AND ALL, AND EVEN POURED IN THE BLOOD. THE ELDERS ALL LOOKED ON, HORRIFIED, BUT THEY KNEW HE DID STRANGE THINGS, THEY JUST SHOOK THEIR HEADS AND SAID NOTHING.

HE PUT THE POT ON THE FIRE, AND STARTED BOILING THE MEAT, AND WHILE HE DID HE MADE UP A SONG ABOUT IT. I CAN'T RECALL ALL THE WORDS, BUT IT WAS SOMETHING ABOUT: 'SET ON THE POT, SET IT ON, PILE ON THE LOGS, MAKE IT BOIL, MAKE IT BOIL'. AND HE SANG ABOUT THE CITY FULL OF BLOOD AND FILTH. THEN HE POURED OFF THE BROTH, PUT THE POT BACK ON THE FIRE, AND LET IT SCORCH AND BURN. THEN HE CALLED THE ELDERS TO PARTAKE OF HIS STEW. OF COURSE NOBODY WOULD TOUCH IT. BESIDES BEING SCORCHED, IT WAS UTTER FILTH.

THEN HE SAID, 'YOU THINK GOD WON'T LET JERUSALEM, HIS CITY, AND HIS TEMPLE, BE DESTROYED? JERUSALEM IS JUST LIKE THIS STEW, FILTHY THROUGH AND THROUGH. AND DESTRUCTION IS THE ONLY THING LEFT FOR IT.'

EZEKIEL HAD LISTENED TO THE STORY WITHOUT SAYING A WORD. "WELL, IT WAS TRUE," HE SAID AT LAST, "AND DESTRUCTION DID COME. AND STILL PEOPLE WON'T BELIEVE WHAT GOD SAYS TO THEM." HE GOT UP AND STALKED OUT.

AS HE WENT OUT THE DOOR HE TURNED AND SAID, "BUT MAYBE SOME DAY THEY WILL KNOW THAT GOD HAS REALLY SENT ME TO SAY IT TO THEM."

"OF COURSE THE POT WAS UTTERLY RUINED," HANNAH SAID. "IT WAS THE ONLY LARGE COOKING POT I HAD. I HAD LET SOMETHING SCORCH IN IT THE DAY BEFORE, AND HAD LEFT IT SOAKING SO THAT I COULD CLEAN IT. I WONDERED HOW I COULD GET ANOTHER, BUT THE NEXT DAY ONE OF THE ELDERS SENT ME A NEW ONE. SOMEBODY TOOK PITY ON ME. I NEVER KNEW WHO IT WAS."

IT WAS TIME FOR US TO GO. WE THANKED OUR HOSTESS, JERUSHA CALLED THE CHILDREN, AND TOOK OUR WAY.

"HE IS A STRANGE MAN INDEED," I SAID AS WE WALKED BACK TO FATHER'S HOUSE. "NO WONDER PEOPLE THINK HE IS CRAZY."

"BUT HE REALLY IS A PROPHET," JERUSHA SAID.

"AND SOME PEOPLE WILL LISTEN TO HIM," YESHUA ADDED. "I HOPED SO."

SHEALTIEL

WE WENT BACK TO BAB-EL, AND FOUND A HOUSE READY FOR US, DUE TO SAMUEL'S THOUGHTFULNESS. WE HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING WHAT MY NEXT ASSIGNMENT WOULD BE, OR WHERE, OR WHEN. FOR THE TIME BEING WE WOULD RESIDE IN THE CAPITAL. THE CHILDREN ENTERED SCHOOL. YESHUA WAS TWELVE, MAHLAH TEN, JOAB EIGHT. YESHUA WENT TO A SCHOOL EXCLUSIVELY FOR BOYS. HE WAS SELF RELIANT, AND WENT AND RETURNED UNACCOMPANIED. THE OTHERS WERE ACCOMPANIED BY A SERVANT, TO A SCHOOL THAT WAS FOR BOYS AND GIRLS, THOUGH THE BOYS OUTNUMBERED THE GIRLS BY ABOUT TWO TO ONE. MANY PEOPLE IN BAB-EL THOUGHT GIRLS NEEDED NO EDUCATION. YESHUA WAS ONE OF THE YOUNGEST AT HIS SCHOOL, AND THE OTHER BOYS MUST HAVE GIVEN HIM A HARD TIME AT FIRST. HE OFTEN CAME IN LOOKING SOMEWHAT THE WORSE FOR WEAR, BUT I THINK HE GAVE A PRETTY GOOD ACCOUNT OF HIMSELF. HE MADE NO COMPLAINT, AND WE DID NOT PROBE.

I HAD AN OFFICE IN ONE OF THE LESSER BUILDINGS ADJOINING THE PALACE. TWO SECRETARIES ASSISTED ME, BUT MOST OF THE TIME THERE WAS LITTLE FOR US TO DO. OF COURSE THERE WERE RECORDS TO BE KEPT, AND OCCASIONALLY WHEN THE COUNCIL OF NOBLES HAD A MEETING I WOULD BE CALLED ON TO REPORT ON SOME MATTER ON WHICH I HAD SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE.

THE KING WAS AWAY, ON A CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE MEDES. THEY WERE ALWAYS MAKING TROUBLE. THE THREE ELDEST PRINCES WERE WITH HIM, EACH COMMANDING A DIVISION OF THE ARMY. (THERE HAD BEEN FIVE PRINCES OLDER THAN EVIL-MARDUK; TWO HAD DIED, ONE OF ILLNESS, THE OTHER KILLED IN BATTLE.) EVIL-MARDUK WAS SAID TO BE IN ELAM ON SOME SPECIAL MISSION.

TWO YEARS WENT BY IN THIS COMPARATIVE IDLENESS. DURING ALL THAT TIME I NEVER SAW NERGAL-SHAREZER, BUT ONCE I MET ASSASHAGGA, HIS TUTOR, WHO TOLD ME HE WAS PREPARING THE PRINCE TO ENTER THE UNIVERSITY.

THE FIRST YEAR WE WERE INVITED TO DANIEL'S HOME FOR THE PASSOVER. HIS SON ISAIAH WAS NOT THERE; THEY TOLD US HE WAS EATING THE PASSOVER FEAST WITH HIS WIFE'S FAMILY. ZECHARIAH, THE YOUNGER SON, TOLD US HE HAD BEEN STUDYING WITH A TUTOR, AND WOULD ENTER THE UNIVERSITY IN THE FALL. RUTH, A BEAUTIFUL GIRL OF TWENTY-ONE, WAS STILL UNMARRIED. JERUSHA TEASED HER ABOUT IT, ASKED HER IF SHE WANTED TO BE AN OLD MAID.

"MAYBE NOT," RUTH SAID, LAUGHING. BUT SHE BLUSHED AS SHE SAID IT. WE CONCLUDED THAT THERE MUST BE SOME PROSPECT IN VIEW.

"HAD YOU HEARD OF ZEDEKIAH'S DEATH?" DANIEL ASKED.

"NO," I SAID. "WHEN DID HE DIE?"

"HE WAS DIED YESTERDAY — STILL WITH THE MANACLES ON, BY THE KING'S ORDERS."

"NEDUCHADREZZAR IS A HARD MAN," I SAID. "DID HE WANT TO HAVE HIM TURN AGAINST ME?"

"HE NEVER FORGIVES ANY SORT OF TREACHERY," DANIEL SAID. "ZEDEKIAH HAD IT COMING TO HIM, NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT. BUT EVEN SO, IT WAS A CRUEL THING, TO SEE HIS SONS SLAIN AS THE LAST SIGHT BEFORE HE WAS BLINDED, THEN TO BE KEPT MANACLED ALL THIS TIME, OVER SEVEN YEARS NOW, BLIND AND HELPLESS — THAT IS A CRUEL FATE INDEED. I'M SURPRISED HE LIVED AS LONG AS HE DID."

"SO AM I. HOW IS JECONIAH HOLDING UP?"

"HE IS UNHAPPY, BUT SEEMS TO BE MORE RECONCILED. REALLY, HE IS TREATED PRETTY WELL, BETTER THAN MOST. BUT STILL HE IS UNHAPPY."

"WHAT ABOUT HIS SON — SHEALTIEL, WASN'T IT?" I ASKED.

"YES, HE WILL GRADUATE SOON, AND GET HIS COMMISSION IN THE ARMY. AND AFTER THAT THERE WILL BE A WEDDING. GUESS WHO WILL BE THE BRIDE?"

RUTH BLUSHED FURIOUSLY. "OH, SO THAT'S HOW IT IS," WE SAID. "WELL, WE SURELY WISH YOU MUCH HAPPINESS."

"YOU WILL GET AN INVITATION TO THE WEDDING," SAID RUTH'S MOTHER, WHO HAD HARDLY SPOKEN BEFORE THIS.

AND WE DID, IN DUE TIME. IT WAS A HAPPY OCCASION. THE BRIDE WAS BEAUTIFUL, AND SHEALTIEL, A FINE FIGURE OF A MAN, LOOKED VERY SMART IN HIS NEW UNIFORM.

"HOW DOES YOUR FATHER FEEL ABOUT YOUR GOING INTO THE ARMY OF BAD-EL?" I ASKED.

"HE DOESN'T LIKE IT. HE SAYS I AM BEING DISLOYAL TO MY COUNTRY. BUT THE WAY I LOOK AT IT, THIS IS MY COUNTRY. I WAS JUST A BABY WHEN OUR PEOPLE CAME HERE, AND THIS IS THE ONLY COUNTRY I HAVE EVER KNOWN."

THAT DID SEEM TO MAKE SENSE, WHEN YOU LOOKED AT IT THAT WAY. AND SHEALTIEL WAS VERY PROUD OF HIS POSITION AS AN OFFICER IN THE ARMY. OF COURSE I WAS SERVING THE GOVERNMENT OF BAD-EL TOO, THOUGH NOT IN THE ARMED SERVICES. AND I DID NOT THINK MY SERVICE MADE ME ANY LESS LOYAL TO MY OWN PEOPLE. I FELT THAT I HAD A DOUBLE CITIZENSHIP.

THAT SUMMER WE WENT TO CHEGAR AGAIN, AND STAYED A MONTH. IT WAS THE MOST TIME I HAD STAYED WITH MY MOTHER SINCE LEAVING JERUSALEM SO LONG AGO. I MARVELED AT HER VIGOR AND RESOURCEFULNESS. SHE HAD GOT ALONG VERY WELL WITH TIRZAH, WHO WAS NOW FOURTEEN, VERY PRETTY AND OF A SUNNY DISPOSITION, SEEMING TO HAVE INHERITED NOTHING OF HER MOTHER'S PERVERSE SPIRIT. JEREMIAH

WAS SHAPING UP VERY NICELY AS FATHER'S ASSISTANT. BUT I NOTICED FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT FATHER WAS GETTING QUITE GRAY. HE IS ALMOST AN OLD MAN, I THOUGHT. AND WHAT ABOUT ME? I WAS THIRTY-THREE; MY FAMILY WOULD SOON BE GROWN. "HOW TIME FLIES!" I SAID. BUT WHEN I THOUGHT OF THE PROMISE OF RETURN TO JERUSALEM AFTER SEVENTY YEARS, IT STILL SEEMED AN ETERNITY — STILL FORTY-TWO YEARS TO GO. NO OF COURSE IT MIGHT NOT BE EXACTLY SEVENTY YEARS, PERHAPS JEREMIAH HAD MEANT IT AS A ROUND NUMBER. I HOPED I MIGHT LIVE TO SEE IT, BUT IF I DID, I WOULD SURELY BE AN OLD MAN.

ELASA, MY FATHER-IN-LAW, HAD TAKEN SERIOUSLY THE COMMAND TO BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY. JERUSHA NOW HAD EIGHT HALF BROTHERS AND SISTERS. SHE WROTE DOWN ALL THE NAMES AND LATER, I GAVE UP ON TRYING TO REMEMBER THEM ALL. AND MANY OTHERS SEEMED TO HAVE TAKEN THE COMMAND SERIOUSLY. EVERYWHERE I LOOKED, THERE WERE MORE CHILDREN, MORE PROCREANT WOMEN. JEDIDAH HAD ANOTHER BABY GIRL, AND SHIMEATH WAS BOASTING OF THREE SONS.

IT HAD BEEN SOME TIME SINCE I HAD SEEN ISAIAN, BUT THAT FALL HE PAID ME A VISIT. HE WANTED TO SHOW ME SOMETHING HE HAD WRITTEN.

"I WAS LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW AT THE MARKET SQUARE," HE SAID, "AND I SAW PEOPLE LOADING UP THEIR BAGGAGE FOR A TRIP. PART OF THEIR LOAD WAS THE IMAGES OF THEIR GODS — BEL, NADU, AND SOME OTHERS. HOW SILLY, I THOUGHT, TO HAVE A GOD THAT HAD TO BE CARRIED AROUND, JUST ANOTHER BURDEN FOR A WEARY PACK ANIMAL! ANYWAY, AS I THOUGHT ABOUT IT, THIS CAME TO ME, AND I WROTE IT DOWN." HE HANDED ME A PAPYRUS WRITTEN IN HEBREW.

"BEL LIES PRONE, NADU LOW IN THE DUST,
THEIR IMAGES A LOAD FOR ASSES AND CATTLE;
THEY ARE CARRIED AROUND AS BURDENS FOR WEARY BEASTS.
HELPLESS, THEY ARE MERELY A PART OF THE BURDEN,
THEY HAVE NO POWER TO SAVE, THEY THEMSELVES MUST BE CARED FOR."

"LISTEN TO ME, O HOUSE OF JACOB,
ALL YOU REMNANT OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL,
I HAVE CARRIED YOU, SINCE THE DAY OF YOUR BIRTH,
AND WHEN YOU ARE OLD AND GRAY I WILL CARRY YOU STILL,
IN YOUTH AND AGE, I AM YOUR GOD.
I HAVE MADE YOU, I WILL CARRY YOU,
I WILL CARRY YOU AND SAVE YOU."

"CAN YOU MAKE AN IMAGE OF ME?
IS THERE ANYTHING YOU KNOW THAT IS LIKE ME?
THOSE WHO MAKE IMAGES LAY OUT GOLD FROM THEIR TREASURE,
AND SILVER, WEIGHING THESE THINGS IN SCALES,
THEY HIRE A GOLDSMITH TO MAKE IT INTO A GOD!
THEY FALL DOWN BEFORE IT AND WORSHIP!
THEY LIFT IT UP ON THEIR SHOULDERS, THEY CARRY IT AROUND,
THEY SET IT IN ITS PLACE, AND THERE IT STANDS,
UNABLE TO MOVE FROM ITS PLACE.
IF ONE CRIES TO IT IT MAKES NO ANSWER,
IT IS POWERLESS TO HELP THE MAN WHO MADE IT,
TO SAVE HIM IN HIS HOUR OF TROUBLE."

"REMEMBER, O HOUSE OF JACOB, AND CONSIDER,
CALL IT TO MIND, ALL YOU WHO HAVE DISOBEYED,
REMEMBER MY SALVATION IN THE DAYS OF LONG AGO.
FOR I AM GOD, AND THERE IS NO OTHER,
I AM GOD, AND THERE IS NOTHING RESEMBLING ME."

"THAT'S VERY GOOD," I SAID. "STILL NO HEAVENLY VOICES?"

"NO HEAVENLY VOICES," HE SAID. "BUT I BELIEVE GOD IS REALLY SPEAKING TO ME, IN HIS OWN WAY. I HAVE WRITTEN SOME OTHER THINGS, I AM SAVING THEM, REVISING THEM FROM TIME TO TIME."

"YOU ARE NOT PREACHING TO THE PEOPLE?"

"NO, I DON'T THINK I HAVE ANY GIFT FOR PREACHING. IF I HAVE ANY SORT OF CALLING IT IS FOR WRITING."

"WELL, KEEP IT UP," I SAID. "GOD CAN USE WRITING AS WELL AS PREACHING. BUT DON'T LET THE HIGH PRIESTS OF BEL AND NADU SEE IT. YOU MIGHT FIND YOURSELF UNDER ARREST, CHARGED WITH SACRILEGE."

"YES, I KNOW," HE SAID. "I DON'T THINK MANY OF THEM CAN READ HEBREW, BUT I'LL TRY TO BE CAREFUL. BUT WHAT I FEEL THAT GOD HAS TOLD ME TO SAY, I'VE GOT TO WRITE, NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO ME."

IN THE FOLLOWING SPRING I WAS INVITED TO A CIRCUMCISION FEAST. ISAIAH'S SON WAS NAMED ANOZ. THAT WAS HIS FIRST SON; HE HAD A DAUGHTER THREE YEARS OLD NAMED ADIUNA. ISAIAH WAS OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH; HIS WIFE WAS ACZAH, DAUGHTER OF SHEOR, A BENJAMINITE.

AND RIGHT AFTER THAT CAME ANOTHER INVITATION TO A CIRCUMCISION FEAST. SHEALTIEL PROUDLY ANNOUNCED THE BIRTH OF A SON. THEY GAVE HIM THE NAME ZERUD-GADEL -- BORN IN BAB-EL.

A T H E N S

IT WAS IN THE WINTER AFTER YESHUA'S BIRTHDAY FOURTEEN THAT I WAS SUMMONED TO A CONFERENCE WITH THE KING AND SOME OF HIS ADVISERS. THERE WAS NOT THE EASY INFORMALITY I HAD ENJOYED ON FORMER INTERVIEWS WITH THE KING. THIS TIME HE WAS CONSIDERATE, BUT STRICTLY BUSINESS.

"I REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE FLUENT IN GREEK," THE KING SAID. "WE NEED A REPRESENTATIVE IN GREECE, AND I WANT TO SEND YOU."

"I AM AT YOUR MAJESTY'S COMMAND," I REPLIED.

"THE GREEKS ARE BECOMING MORE AND MORE INFLUENTIAL," THE KING WENT ON. "THEY HAVE ESTABLISHED COLONIES ACROSS THE SEA, ALL ALONG THE COAST, EVEN INTO THE EUXINE. THEY ARE A PEOPLE TO BE RECKONED WITH. SO FAR, THEY DO NOT POSE ANY THREAT TO OUR EMPIRE, DIVIDED AS THEY ARE -- HOW MANY DIFFERENT STATES DID YOU SAY THERE ARE OF THEM? HE ASKED OF ONE OF THE COUNCILLORS.

"I DO NOT KNOW, YOUR MAJESTY, BUT SOME SAY AS MANY AS A HUNDRED."

"ANYWAY," THE KING SAID, "I THINK IT IS TIME WE HAD A REPRESENTATIVE THERE. WE WON'T SET UP A FULL SCALE EMBASSY YET, BUT IF WE HAVE A DEPENDABLE MAN THERE WHO CAN SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE AND GET TO KNOW THEM, AND GIVE US ACCURATE REPORTS ON WHAT GOES ON THERE, IT SHOULD BE USEFUL. I BELIEVE YOU ARE SUCH A MAN, AND I WANT YOU TO GO."

"TO WHAT CITY SHALL I GO, OF ALL THOSE STATES?"

THE KING TURNED TO THE COUNCILLOR WHO SEEMED BEST INFORMED OF ALL THOSE PRESENT. "TO ATHENS, I THINK, SIRE," THE COUNCILLOR SAID.

"SO BE IT, THEN," SAID THE KING. "BE READY TO START IN THE SPRING."

"I GATHER THAT YOU WANT ME TO STAY FOR SOME TIME, SIRE," I SAID.

"YES, TAKE YOUR FAMILY WITH YOU, AND PLAN TO STAY AT LEAST TWO YEARS. VERY LIKELY WE SHALL WANT YOU TO STAY EVEN LONGER."

THEY REFERRED ME TO AN OFFICIAL WHO GAVE ME INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT MY TRAVEL. I WAS TO GO BY DAMASCUS, AND FROM THERE TO TYRE, WHERE IT WOULD BE EASY TO FIND A SHIP BOUND FOR ATHENS. "SHUZUBU IS OUR GOVERNOR IN TYRE," THE OFFICIAL SAID. "HE CAN PUT YOU IN TOUCH WITH THE PEOPLE YOU NEED TO KNOW. THERE IS A BAKING HOUSE IN TYRE THAT WILL MAKE ARRANGEMENTS ABOUT YOUR SALARY AND EXPENSES."

"JUST WHEN I'M BEGINNING TO GET SETTLED HERE, WE HAVE TO PACK UP AND MOVE," WAS JERUSHA'S COMMENT WHEN I TOLD HER THE NEWS THAT NIGHT. BUT THE CHILDREN WERE HAPPY ABOUT IT, FILLED WITH THE EXCITEMENT OF GOING TO A NEW PLACE. SECRETLY, I THOUGHT JERUSHA FELT THE SAME WAY; BUT WITHOUT DOUBT MOVING IS A CHORE. YESHUA'S COMMENT WAS: "I SURE WILL BE GLAD TO GET AWAY FROM THIS CLAY WRITING."

ANYWAY, WE HAD TO GO. THERE WAS A CAMEL CARAVAN GOING TO DAMASCUS, LEAVING SOON AFTER THE PASS OVER, AND WE WERE ABLE TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS TO GO WITH THAT. TRAVEL BY HANDS IS A LOT FASTER THAN ON FOOT, I REFLECTED, AS WE FOLLOWED THE ARAB ALONG THE EUPHRATES AND ACROSS THE DESERT, THE SAME TRAIL OVER WHICH WE HAD COME ALMOST TWENTY YEARS BEFORE. EVEN SO, IT WAS WELL INTO THE SUMMER WHEN WE REACHED DAMASCUS. WE HAD TO WAIT THERE ABOUT THREE WEEKS BEFORE WE COULD GO WITH A MILITARY ESCORT TO TYRE, THIS TIME RIDING MULES. THERE WAS STILL SNOW ON MOUNT HERMON AS WE PASSED IT. WE CAMPED ONE NIGHT AT ANCIENT DAN, WHERE THE WATER GUSHES OUT FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO FORM A FULL-GROWN RIVER, ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL SOURCES OF THE JORDAN.

AT TYRE I CALLED ON THE GOVERNOR, AND PRESENTED MY LETTERS OF INTRODUCTION. HE RECEIVED US VERY GRACIOUSLY, AND INVITED US TO BE GUESTS IN HIS HOME WHILE WE WAITED FOR A SHIP. HE HAD A LARGE PLACE, THERE WAS PLENTY OF ROOM. WE WERE THERE SIXTEEN DAYS.

THE CHILDREN WERE DELIGHTED TO SEE THE SEA, WHICH THEY HAD NOT SEEN SINCE OUR VOYAGE FROM EGYPT, SEVEN YEARS BEFORE. THERE WERE MANY SHIPS IN THE PORT, LOADING AND UNLOADING, SHIPS FROM FAR AWAY PLACES, FROM EGYPT, CARTHAGE, SYRACUSE, EVEN ONE FROM TARSHISH, FAR TO THE WEST, THOUGHT OF AS THE END OF THE WORLD. AND OF COURSE THERE WERE SHIPS GOING TO VARIOUS PORTS ALONG THE COAST, AND EVEN THROUGH THE HELLESPONT AND INTO THE EUXINE. AND AT LAST THERE WAS ONE BOUND FOR PIRAEUS, THE PORT OF ATHENS. WE BOOKED OUR PASSAGE, AND WENT ABOARD WHEN THE SHIP WAS READY TO SAIL.

WE HAD A GOOD PASSAGE. THE WINDS WERE GENERALLY FAVORABLE, BUT OFTEN LIGHT. WE MADE SEVERAL STOPS, AND ALL TOGETHER WE WERE TWENTY DAYS ABOARD. IT WAS GOOD AT LAST TO GET OUR FEET IN SOLID EARTH AGAIN.

ALL THE WAY I HAD BEEN GIVING JERUSHA AND THE CHILDREN LESSONS IN GREEK, BUT EVEN SO THEY FELT LOST AND HONESICK AT FIRST. FOR A WHILE I WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD SPEAK TO SERVANTS AND TRADESMEN. THERE WAS NOBODY WHO COULD SPEAK ARAMAIC, TO SAY NOTHING OF ARKHAIC OR HEBREW. BUT BEFORE LONG THE FAMILY, HEARING NOTHING BUT GREEK ON EVERY SIDE, AND STUDYING CONSTANTLY, BEGAN TO BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE. BY THE TIME WE HAD BEEN IN ATHENS SIX MONTHS WE FELT THAT WE WERE GREEKANS.

THE THREE CHILDREN ALL WENT TO DIFFERENT SCHOOLS. YESHUA WAS OLD ENOUGH TO ATTEND A SCHOOL FOR ADOLESCENT BOYS; JOAB WENT TO A SCHOOL FOR YOUNGER BOYS, ACCOMPANIED BY A TRUSTWORTHY SLAVE. NAOMI WAS THIRTEEN, AND SHE WAS A SPECIAL CASE.

MANY OF THE GREEKS THOUGHT THAT EDUCATION WAS NOT IMPORTANT FOR GIRLS, BUT SOME DISAGREED VERY STRONGLY, SAYING THAT WOMEN WERE THE EQUALS OF MEN IN EVERYTHING. WE DID FIND A SUITABLE SCHOOL, NOT TOO FAR AWAY, AND WE ENGAGED A EUNUCH TO ACCOMPANY HER TO AND FROM SCHOOL EACH DAY.

THERE WERE A FEW ISRAELITES IN ATHENS, SOME OF WHOM HAD BEEN THERE FOR THREE GENERATIONS AND FORGOTTEN ALMOST ALL THEIR HEBREW, AND OTHERS WHO HAD FLED FROM JERUSALEM BEFORE THE SIEGE. THEY KNEW NOTHING OF THE SACRED BOOKS. IN MY SPARE TIME I BEGAN TRANSLATING PORTIONS OF THE TORAH INTO GREEK FOR THEM. WE BEGAN GATHERING THEM INTO OUR HOME ON THE SABBATH DAYS. I READ TO THEM FROM THE SACRED BOOKS IN HEBREW, AND EXPLAINED THE MEANING IN GREEK. I TAUGHT THEM SOME OF THE RITUAL PRAYERS. EVENTUALLY WE ORGANIZED THEM INTO A KENOSHET, AND WE ALL FELT THAT WE WERE THE PEOPLE OF GOD, THOUGH FAR FROM OUR HOME LAND. WE BEGAN TO SPEAK OF OURSELVES AS THE DISPERSION.

WHEN I INTRODUCED MYSELF AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF NEDUCHADREZZAR, THE GREAT KING OF BAB-ILU, PEOPLE LOOKED AT ME STRANGELY, AS IF I HAD CLAIMED TO BE FROM THE MOON. BUT MANY OF THE EDUCATED GREEKS HAD HEARD OF NEDUCHADREZZAR, AND KNEW ABOUT BAB-ILU; ONLY THEY PUT THE LETTER N ON IT, AND CALLED IT BABYLON. IN THE DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY I WAS WELL RECEIVED. THE EGYPTIAN AMBASSADOR WAS ESPECIALLY FRIENDLY, AS I WAS ALMOST THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD SPEAK HIS LANGUAGE. WE WERE OFTEN GUESTS IN HIS HOME. JERUSHA AND THE CHILDREN HAD ALMOST FORGOTTEN THEIR EGYPTIAN, BUT IT SOON CAME BACK TO THEM. THE AMBASSADOR'S CHILDREN WERE NEAR THE AGES OF OURS, AND WE SOON BECAME CLOSE FRIENDS.

NOT LONG AFTER OUR ARRIVAL SOLON RETURNED TO ATHENS, AFTER AN ABSENCE OF TEN YEARS. WHEN HE HAD RULED ATHENS HE HAD FORMULATED THE NEW CONSTITUTION AND CODE OF LAWS, QUITE REVOLUTIONARY. ATHENS NO LONGER HAD KINGS, BUT ARCHOI, AS THEY CALLED THEM, A COUNCIL OF NOBLES, AND A GREAT ASSEMBLY, IN WHICH EVERY FREEHOLDER WAS ALLOWED TO VOTE. BUT THE NEW CODE, THOUGH ACCEPTED AND RETAINED, HAD SO MUCH DISPLEASED THE LANDLORD CLASS THAT

SOLON HAD BEEN FORCED INTO EXILE FOR TEN YEARS. BUT IN SPITE OF THE OPPOSITION OF CERTAIN PRIVILEGED GROUPS, THE NEW CODE HAD WORKED SO WELL THAT NOW PEOPLE WELCOMED SOLON BACK AGAIN.

I WENT TO CALL ON SOLON. "IS IT TRUE," I ASKED, "AS I HAVE HEARD PEOPLE SAY, THAT YOU CANCELED ALL DEBTS, SO THAT EVERYBODY COULD START OVER, ALL EQUAL?"

"NO," HE SAID, "IT WAS NOT QUITE THAT. BUT I DID BRING A LOT OF RELIEF TO THE DEBTOR CLASSES, WHO WERE IN DANGER OF BEING COMPLETELY ENSLAVED. NOW THE FARMERS, ARTISANS, AND FISHERMEN HAVE A MUCH GREATER OPPORTUNITY IN LIFE, AND THE STATE IS BEGINNING TO RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF IT. INDUSTRY IN PARTICULAR IS MUCH BETTER OFF, AND OUR EXPORT TRADE IS GREATLY INCREASED."

SOLON HAD HEARD OF HAMMURABI AND HIS ANCIENT CODE OF LAWS, BUT HAD NEVER HAD OPPORTUNITY TO STUDY IT THOROUGHLY. I HAD A COPY, AND PROMISED TO TRANSLATE IT INTO GREEK FOR HIM. I TOLD HIM ABOUT MOSES, AND OUR LAWS, AND HE WAS GREATLY INTERESTED. THE IDEA OF THE YEAR OF JUBILEE, IN WHICH ALL DEBTS WERE CANCELED AND ALL SLAVES FREED, APPEALED TO HIM, ALSO THE IDEA OF GIVING THE LAND REST ONE YEAR IN SEVEN. I TRANSLATED PART OF THE TORAH INTO GREEK FOR HIM. WE MET OFTEN, AND HAD MANY AGREEABLE DISCUSSIONS. I TOLD HIM A LITTLE OF OUR WORSHIP, AND OUR BELIEF THAT WE ARE GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE. HE LISTENED RESPECTFULLY, BUT DID NOT SEEM TO TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.

I VISITED SPARTA, CELEBRATED AS HAVING THE FINEST MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT OF ALL THE GREEK STATES. I HAD TO GO TO EAT THE INFAMOUS BLACK SOUP, BUT I COULD CERTAINLY NOT DRINK IT. I SENT MY GOVERNMENT A REPORT ON THE SPARTAN ARMY, THE SYSTEM OF TRAINING, AND THE WEAPONS AND TACTICS EMPLOYED. I INFORMED THEM THAT MANY COMPANIES OF SPARTAN SOLDIERS WENT ABROAD TO SERVE AS MERCENARIES, FOR EGYPT AND OTHER COUNTRIES.

I MENTIONED IN MY REPORT THAT IF THE MANY GREEK STATES SHOULD EVER BE UNITED UNDER ONE RULER THEY MIGHT WELL BE A MENACE TO OTHER NATIONS. THEIR DISCIPLINE WAS SUPERB, AND THEIR COURAGE INCREDIBLE. BUT AS LONG AS THEY SPENT THEIR ENERGIES FIGHTING AMONG THEMSELVES THERE WAS NOTHING TO FEAR FROM THEM.

BUT THE MOST INTRIGUING THING ABOUT THE GREEKS, TO ME, WAS THEIR CUSTOM OF DECLARING A TRUCE EVERY FOUR YEARS FOR THE OLYMPIC GAMES. ALL THOSE STATES THAT HAD BEEN FIGHTING TIGHT AND NAIL WOULD LEAVE OFF THE FIGHTING FOR TWO OR THREE WEEKS FOR RACES AND OTHER ATHLETIC CONTESTS, THEN, WHEN THE GAMES WERE OVER, GO BACK TO FIGHTING.

WE STAYED FIVE YEARS IN ATHENS. DURING THE SUMMER VACATIONS, WHEN THE CHILDREN WERE FREE OF SCHOOL DUTIES, WE TRAVELED TO MANY INTERESTING PLACES, NOTABLY TO MYCENAE. I HAD READ MOST OF HOMER'S POEMS, SO HAD THE CHILDREN IN SCHOOL, AND WE FOUND THE PLACE OF SURPASSING INTEREST. WE WERE PARTICULARLY IMPRESSED WITH THE LION GATE.

WE VISITED THE ORACLE AT DELPHI, AND LISTENED TO MANY TALES OF THE SUPPOSEDLY PROPHETIC UTTERANCES. I WAS NOT GREATLY IMPRESSED, BECAUSE I HAD SEEN SOMETHING OF REAL PROPHECY. I MADE NO INQUIRY OF THE ORACLE, BECAUSE IN ORDER TO DO SO I WOULD HAVE HAD TO MAKE A SACRIFICE TO APOLLO, AND THAT I WOULD NEVER DO. TO ME IT WOULD HAVE BEEN IDOLATRY, A GRIEVOUS SIN. STILL, IT WAS INTERESTING TO SEE THE PLACE.

I HAD BEEN INFORMED AT THE END OF OUR FOURTH YEAR THAT NEBUCHADREZZAR PLANNED TO ESTABLISH A FULL SCALE EMBASSY IN ATHENS. WHEN THE AMBASSADOR ARRIVED, WITH A CONSIDERABLE STAFF, I WELCOMED THE IDEA OF RETURNING TO BAB-EL, BUT I WAS CONCERNED ABOUT THE LANGUAGE PROBLEMS OF THE NEW AMBASSADOR, AS NONE OF HIS STAFF HAD ANY REAL FLUENCY IN GREEK. THEN WE HIT ON A SOLUTION. YESHUA WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD, AND WELL PREPARED TO SERVE IN THE EMBASSY AS SECRETARY-INTERPRETER. THE AMBASSADOR WELCOMED THE IDEA.

"I CONSENT," I SAID, "BUT FOR ONLY ONE YEAR. AFTER THAT I THINK YOU SHOULD REJOIN US IN BAB-EL."

"WHY?" YESHUA PROTESTED. "I LIKE THIS COUNTRY, WHY NOT STAY HERE AND MAKE A CAREER HERE?"

"AND WHAT ABOUT MARRIAGE?"

"WELL, I HAD THOUGHT ABOUT THAT. RIGHT NOW I DON'T SEE ANY GIRLS IN THE ISRAELITE COMMUNITY THAT APPEAL TO ME. WHAT ABOUT MARRYING A GREEK GIRL?"

"YOU OUGHT TO MARRY ONE OF YOUR OWN PEOPLE, IF POSSIBLE ONE OF YOUR OWN TRIBE. REMEMBER, YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO BE A PRIEST."

"THE TEMPLE IS GONE. WILL THERE EVER BE ANY PRIESTS ANY MORE?"

"IF WE DO GO BACK TO OUR OWN COUNTRY THERE WILL BE -- AND THERE WILL BE A TEMPLE, SOME DAY. SOMEBODY WILL HAVE TO BE HIGH PRIEST, AND WHO IS A BETTER CANDIDATE FOR THAT THAN YOURSELF?"

"REALLY?"

"YOU MUST KNOW THAT YOUR GREAT GRANDFATHER WAS HIGH PRIEST, BACK IN JOSIAH'S TIME, AND YOUR GRANDFATHER WOULD HAVE BEEN IF POLITICAL PRESSURE HADN'T DEPRIVED HIM OF IT. AZARIAH IS TOO OLD, I WILL BE TOO OLD, AND YOU WILL BE THE LOGICAL CHOICE."

"AND DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THAT THAT WILL HAPPEN, IN OUR TIME?"

"I AM SURE IT WILL," I SAID. "JEREMIAH SAID IT, AS SERIOUSLY AS HE EVER SAID ANYTHING. 'SEVENTY YEARS,' HE SAID. I DON'T KNOW WHETHER HE MEANT EXACTLY THAT NUMBER, OR JUST A ROUND NUMBER FOR A LONG TIME. YOU ARE IN LINE FOR THAT HIGH OFFICE, AND IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU MAKE THE RIGHT KIND OF MARRIAGE."

YESHUA SEEMED SKEPTICAL, AS YOUNG MEN OFTEN ARE OF THEIR FATHERS' ADVICE, BUT AT LEAST HE DIDN'T REBEL AGAINST IT. "ALL RIGHT," HE SAID, "I PROMISE TO WAIT A YEAR, AND THEN RETURN TO BAB-EL IF POSSIBLE. AFTER THAT, WE'LL SEE."

SO WE LEFT HIM IN ATHENS, WITH SOME MISGIVINGS. THE SALARY WOULD BE GOOD, AND WITHOUT DOUBT HE WOULD BE USEFUL TO THE EMBASSY, BUT STILL WE WERE FEARFUL. AND WE HATED TO SEE THE FAMILY CIRCLE BROKEN, BUT THAT, AS WE KNEW, WAS INEVITABLE.

IT WAS TIME ALSO TO THINK ABOUT A SUITABLE MARRIAGE FOR MAHLAN. SHE WAS ALMOST EIGHTEEN, MOST GIRLS WERE MARRIED BEFORE THAT AGE. WHEN WE GOT BACK TO OUR OWN PEOPLE WE WOULD HAVE TO START LOOKING FOR A SUITABLE HUSBAND FOR HER.

WE FOUND A SHIP GOING TO SMYRNA, AND DECIDED TO TAKE THAT, AND GO BY WAY OF SARDIS, THE CAPITAL OF LYDIA. LYDIA HAD ITS OWN KING, BUT PAID TRIBUTE TO NEBUCHADREZZAR, AND WAS REALLY PART OF THE EMPIRE. IT WAS AN IMPORTANT PART, TOO, FOR MANY OF THE GREEK CITIES ON THE EUXINE PAID TRIBUTE TO LYDIA, AND IT WAS AN IMMENSELY WEALTHY LAND.

WE FOUND SARDIS HEAVILY GARRISONED, AN INVASION ATTEMPT BY THE MEDES HAD BEEN REPELLED, BUT EVERYBODY WAS FEARFUL OF ANOTHER. ELYATTA, THE KING, BEGGED ME TO EXPLAIN TO OUR GOVERNMENT THE URGENT NEED FOR REINFORCEMENTS.

AND SO WE LEFT PLEASANT SARDIS, CROSSED THE PLATEAU, AND CAME BACK TO THE WATERS OF THE EUPHRATES, ARRIVING IN BAB-EL IN THE INTENSE HEAT OF LATE SUMMER, RENDERED EVEN MORE OPPRESSIVE BY OUR HAVING JUST COME FROM THE HIGHLANDS.

HANGING GARDENS

WHEN WE RETURNED TO BAB-EL AFTER MORE THAN FIVE YEARS ABSENCE, WE WERE SURPRISED TO SEE A GREAT CONSTRUCTION PROJECT -- MOUNDS OF EARTH, ENORMOUS HEAPS OF BRICK, STONE AND TIMBERS. I WONDERED IF OUR KING WAS TRYING TO IMITATE THE ANCIENT PHARAOHS WHO BUILT THE PYRAMIDS AS TOMBS FOR THEMSELVES. FROM WHAT I HAD BEEN ABLE TO OBSERVE, I THOUGHT THAT NEBUCHADREZZAR WAS A VERY PRACTICAL MINDED SORT OF MAN. I WOULD NEVER HAVE EXPECTED HIM TO DO ANYTHING SO EXTRAVAGANT AND USELESS. I ASKED VARIOUS PEOPLE WHAT THE NEW CONSTRUCTION WAS. MOST OF THEM DENIED ANY KNOWLEDGE OF IT, OR MERELY SMUGGED. SOMEBODY SAID THE KING WAS HAVING A MOUNTAIN BUILT.

OUR FIRST REQUIREMENT WAS A HOUSE TO LIVE IN. WHEN WE FOUND A SUITABLE HOUSE FOR RENT, WE HAD TO GET OUR FURNITURE OUT OF STORAGE, FIND SERVANTS, AND GET OUR LIFE REESTABLISHED IN THE CAPITAL. WHEN WE HAD GOT OUR PERSONAL AFFAIRS IN ORDER, MORE OR LESS, I WENT TO THE PALACE TO PRESENT MY REPORT. THERE I MET EVIL-MARDUK.

EVIL-MARDUK SEEMED GLAD TO SEE ME. IT HAD BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE WE HAD HAD ANY CONTACT. WE HAD MANY THINGS TO TALK OVER. FINALLY I GOT AROUND TO THE THING I HAD BEEN WONDERING ABOUT.

"MAYBE YOU CAN TELL ME," I SAID. "NOBODY ELSE SEEMS TO KNOW WHAT IT IS ABOUT. WHAT IN THE WORLD IS THAT ENORMOUS CONSTRUCTION OVER THERE?" I POINTED TO WHERE MEN AND ANIMALS WERE TALKING ABOUT THE INCREASING COLLECTION OF BUILDING MATERIALS.

"IT'S A LONG STORY," EVIL-MARDUK SAID. "DO YOU REMEMBER — EIGHT YEARS AGO, IT MUST HAVE BEEN — THAT WINTER YOU SPENT UP THERE NEAR MOUNT ARARAT?"

"I'M NOT LIKELY TO FORGET THAT HORRIBLE WINTER," I SAID.

"DO YOU REMEMBER A LITTLE GIRL UP THERE, THE DAUGHTER OF A CHIEF?"

"I SURE DO. SHE PRACTICALLY LIVED IN OUR HOUSE. WHAT WAS HER NAME — NIT..... NIT.....?"

"NITOCRIS," HE SUPPLIED. "DO YOU RECALL THAT MY SON NERGAL-SHAREZER SWORE HE WAS GOING TO MARRY HER?"

"YES, I REMEMBER. DID HE?"

"HE DID. WHATEVER HIS FAULTS, THE BOY HAS DETERMINATION. HE WENT UP THERE LAST YEAR, JUST AS SOON AS SPRING OPENED UP ENOUGH THAT ONE COULD TRAVEL. HE TOOK MEN, HORSES AND CHARIOTS, DEFIED HIS FATHER, AND BROUGHT THE GIRL OUT. HE HAD LEARNED FROM SCOUTS THAT THE GIRL'S FATHER HAD SIGNED UP WITH THE MEDES. NERGAL TOOK ENOUGH FORCE WITH HIM THAT THE TRIBESMEN AND THE FEW MEDE SOLDIERS THERE COULDN'T STOP HIM. THEY HAD A LITTLE SKIRMISH, BUT NOBODY HURT SERIOUSLY. THE GIRL WAS WILLING ENOUGH. SO, WHEN THEY CAME, AND NOW SHE IS ABOUT TO PRESENT ME WITH A GRANDCHILD."

"GOOD FOR HER!" I SAID. "I ALWAYS THOUGHT SHE HAD GOOD STUFF IN HER. CONGRATULATIONS!"

"NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, SHE HAS A LOT OF SPIRIT. AND SHE SEEMS TO HAVE AS MUCH DETERMINATION AS NERGAL, MAYBE EVEN MORE, IF THAT IS POSSIBLE."

"BUT WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH THIS CONSTRUCTION PROJECT?"

"WELL," HE SAID, "WHEN NERGAL BROUGHT HER IN, FATHER WAS HERE. AND AS SOON AS HE SAW THAT GIRL HE WENT ABSOLUTELY CRAZY. YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN THE GIFTS HE GAVE HER! YOU KNOW HE ALWAYS BATED ON NERGAL. WELL, HE STILL DOES, MORE THAN EVER. IT WOULD NOT SURPRISE ME AT ALL IF HE SHOULD PASS OVER ALL HIS SONS AND MAKE NERGAL HIS HEIR — OR NITOCRIS, IF HE COULD, BUT I DON'T THINK PEOPLE WOULD STAND FOR THAT."

"WHO KNOWS?" I SAID. "THINK ABOUT SUMMARAMAT. SHE RULED THE COUNTRY FOR FORTY-FIVE YEARS, SO THE STORIES GO, AND DID SOME WONDERFUL THINGS."

"I NEVER BELIEVED THOSE STORIES. BUT YOU KNOW, NERGAL ALWAYS SAID HE WOULD BE KING SOME DAY, AND I DARE SAY HE WOULD BE. I HAVEN'T THE LEAST DESIRE TO BE KING. BUT ANYWAY, FATHER IS SO INFLUENCED BY HIS GRANDDAUGHTER-IN-LAW THAT HE GIVES HER ANYTHING SHE WANTS FOR. AND WHEN HE SAW HER CRYING BECAUSE SHE WAS HOMESICK FOR THE MOUNTAINS, HE SAID, 'OY NABU I'LL BUILD YOU A MOUNTAIN.' HE CALLED IN ARCHITECTS AND ENGINEERS AND THEY WORKED OVER PLANS, AND NOW THEY ARE BUILDING SOMETHING. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT WILL BE."

"IT LOOKS LIKE IT WOULD COST A LOT OF MONEY."

"NO DOUBT OF THAT. AND I WONDER IF FATHER HAS STOPPED TO THINK HOW MANY THINGS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT NEED DOING. IT'S NOT FOR ME TO TELL HIM. HE'S THE KING, AND THAT'S THAT. STILL....."

EVID-MARDUK SAT SILENT, THINKING. FINALLY HE WENT ON: "BUT I'LL TELL YOU WHO IS REALLY DISTURBED ABOUT IT — MY SPINELESS BROTHER CONAPLU. HE SAYS FATHER IS IN HIS DOYAGE, AND ought to ABOLISH IT."

"HOW OLD IS YOUR FATHER?"

"HE'S ONLY SIXTY-THREE OR SIXTY-FOUR. HE ought TO BE GOOD FOR SEVERAL YEARS YET. AND EXCEPT FOR THIS BUSINESS HE SEEMS TO BE ALL RIGHT. BUT MY OTHER BROTHERS, THE ONLY ONES OLDER THAN I, MARDUK-U-SHA-AD-KARANI AND SHAMASH-KARANI, ARE VERY MUCH CONCERNED ABOUT IT. THEY SAY IF FATHER DOESN'T STOP THIS SORT OF NONSENSE AND PAY ATTENTION TO THE EMPIRE THE MEDES ARE GOING TO DESTROY US."

"AND SO THE CONSTRUCTION IS ALREADY BEGUN."

"YES, FATHER ORDERED ALL THE HOUSES RAZED IN THAT QUARTER OF THE CITY TO MAKE THE PARK WHERE THE MOUNTAIN IS TO BE BUILT. THAT WASN'T SUCH A BAD IDEA — IT WAS A SLUMMY SECTION ANYWAY, AND THE PARK WILL BE NICE. AND MAYBE THE MOUNTAIN WILL BE TOO, IF THEY EVER FINISH IT. BUT STILL....."

"HOW LONG IS THE PROJECT SUPPOSED TO TAKE?" I ASKED.

"WHO KNOWS? AT LEAST ANOTHER FIVE YEARS, I'D GUESS." HE SHOOK HIS HEAD, DOLEFULLY.

I WENT TO VISIT JECONIAH. HE WAS STILL IN PRISON, VERY UNHAPPY, BUT THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE DONE ABOUT IT. WHILE I WAS THERE, A YOUNG MAN CAME IN, A HANDSOME FELLOW. JECONIAH INTRODUCED HIM AS HIS SON, BILSHAN. BILSHAN TOLD ME HE WAS TWENTY YEARS OLD, HAD JUST COMPLETED HIS ENGINEERING COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY, AND WAS EMPLOYED IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW MOUNTAIN, OR GARDEN, OR PARK, OR WHATEVER THEY MIGHT DECIDE TO CALL IT. HE WAS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT IT.

"IT IS GOING TO BE ONE OF THE WONDERS OF THE WORLD!" HE EXCLAIMED. "DON'T THINK ANYTHING LIKE IT HAS EVER BEEN DONE BEFORE." HE WENT ON TO TALK OF THE PLANS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION. "WHEN COMPLETED, IT WILL BE FIFTY CUBITS HIGHER THAN THE ZIGGURAT," HE SAID, "WITH TERRACES PLANTED WITH ALL SORTS OF EXOTIC TREES AND PLANTS, AND AN IRRIGATION SYSTEM SUCH AS YOU WOULD NOT EVEN DREAM OF."

"IT MUST COST A LOT OF MONEY!"

"WELL," HE SAID, LAUGHING, "THAT'S NOT MY PROBLEM. IT WILL BE SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF, AND I'M GETTING WELL PAID FOR MY PART IN IT, SO WHY SHOULD I CARE WHAT IT COSTS?"

"ARE YOU MARRIED, BILSHAN?"

"NOT YET," HE SAID, "BUT I'M LOOKING."

"I HAVE A DAUGHTER EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD," I SAID, "AND NOT BAD LOOKING, I THINK. I WANT TO FIND A SUITABLE HUSBAND FOR HER. YOU MIGHT TRY LOOKING OUR WAY." I TOLD HIM WHERE WE WERE LIVING.

HE KNEW SOMETHING OF MY ACCOMPLISHMENTS, AND WAS IMPRESSED. "I'LL GIVE IT A THOUGHT," HE SAID.

AND HE DID. IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE HE MADE A VISIT IN OUR HOME, AND THE YOUNG PEOPLE SEEMED TO LIKE EACH OTHER. SOON THE ENGAGEMENT WAS ANNOUNCED, AND PLANS WERE SET IN MOTION FOR A WEDDING IN THE SPRING.

AT THE YEAR-END FESTIVALS WE WENT TO CHEBAR FOR AN EXTENDED VISIT. IT HAD BEEN ALMOST SIX YEARS, AND MANY CHANGES HAD COME ABOUT. MOTHER WAS HOLDING UP WELL, BUT FATHER'S STATE OF HEALTH GAVE ME MUCH CONCERN. JERHAM WAS DOING WELL IN THE BUSINESS, HE WAS MARRIED AND HAD A SON. JEDIDAH'S FAMILY NOW NUMBERED SIX.

WE SPENT MUCH TIME AT THE HOME OF JERUSHA'S FATHER. HE WAS GETTING ON IN YEARS, BUT WAS STILL IN GOOD HEALTH. HIS SECOND FAMILY WAS GROWING UP. THE ELDEST SON AND DAUGHTER WERE ALREADY MARRIED AND GONE, BUT THAT LEFT FIVE, THE YOUNGEST A CHARMING LITTLE GIRL NAMED DEBORAH. I WISHED WE COULD TAKE HER HOME WITH US; IT LOOKED LIKE WE WOULD SOON BE A CHILDLESS COUPLE. BUT OF COURSE THEY COULD NOT THINK OF GIVING HER UP.

I VISITED EZEKIEL. HE HAD BEEN WRITING A LOT OF STUFF ABOUT SOME VISIONS HE HAD HAD. I READ OVER SOME OF IT, BUT FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.

"I'M SAVING EVERYTHING HE WRITES," HIS DAUGHTER TOLD ME. "I'VE GIVEN UP TRYING TO READ IT, BUT I STILL SAVE IT."

"KEEP ON DOING THAT," I TOLD HER. "HE REALLY IS A PROPHET, AND WHATEVER HE WRITES IS IMPORTANT, EVEN IF IT MAY SEEM OBSCURE. SOME DAY PEOPLE MAY BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND IT BETTER."

I ASKED EZEKIEL WHAT HE THOUGHT ABOUT THE PROSPECT OF A RETURN TO OUR OWN COUNTRY.

"I AM CONFIDENT THAT OUR PEOPLE WILL GO BACK," HE SAID. "I DOUBT THAT I WILL LIVE TO SEE IT, BUT I FEEL SURE THAT YAHWEH WILL BRING IT ABOUT SOME DAY. HOW HE WILL DO IT, I CANNOT EVEN IMAGINE. BUT I BELIEVE THAT EVEN IF WE WERE ALL DEAD, AND NOTHING BUT A HEAP OF DRY BONES, YAHWEH COULD STILL PUT NEW LIFE INTO THEM, AND USE THEM TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE FOR HIS PEOPLE."

"WHAT ABOUT THE MONARCHY? DO YOU THINK THAT WILL EVER BE RESTORED?"

"I BELIEVE GOD'S PROMISE TO DAVID WILL BE FULFILLED, SOMETIME. BUT I CAN'T BEGIN TO SAY WHEN." HE CALLED TO HIS DAUGHTER TO BRING HIS MANUSCRIPTS, RIFFLED THROUGH THEM UNTIL HE FOUND A POEM, A POEM ABOUT A SWORD. "THIS WAS WRITTEN BEFORE THE FALL OF THE CITY," HE EXPLAINED. WITH FIRE IN HIS EYES HE READ OUT THE OPENING LINES:

"A SWORD! A SWORD IS SHARPENED,
SHARPENED AND POLISHED!
SHARPENED FOR SLAUGHTER,
POLISHED TO GLEAM LIKE LIGHTNING!"

THERE WAS A LOT MORE, HE SKIPPED OVER IT TO GET TO THE PART HE WAS THINKING OF. THEN HE READ OUT AGAIN:

"AND YOU, O WICKED ONE,
PRINCE OF ISRAEL WHOSE TIME HAS COME,"

"THAT WAS ZEDEKIAH," HE EXPLAINED. ALAS, HOW HE SUFFERED! THEN HE CONTINUED READING:

"THUS SAYS YAHWEH GOD,
REMOVE THE TIRBAN, TAKE OFF THE CROWN;
THINGS SHALL NOT REMAIN AS THEY ARE.
EXALT WHAT IS LOW, ABASE WHAT IS HIGH.
A RUIN, A RUIN, A RUIN, I WILL MAKE IT!
NOT A TRACE OF IT WILL THERE BE,
UNTIL HE COMES WHOSE RIGHT IT IS,
AND TO HIM I WILL GIVE IT."

"YOU MEAN THE MONARCHY WILL BE RESTORED," I SAID. "BUT WHEN?"

"GOD KNOWS," HE SAID, PUTTING ASIDE THE MANUSCRIPT.

WE GOT BACK TO THE CAPITAL JUST IN TIME TO BE INVITED TO A GREAT FEAST GIVEN BY THE KING IN HONOR OF THE BIRTH OF HIS GREAT GRANDSON, NADU NATHAN, THE SON OF NERGALE-SHAREZER AND NITOCRIS. THE KING HAD ANY NUMBER OF GREAT GRANDSONS ALREADY, AND HAD NEVER MADE SUCH A COMMOTION ABOUT THEM. EVIDENTLY HE CONSIDERED THIS A SPECIAL CASE.

WHILE WE WERE IN GREECE, JOAB HAD BECOME INTERESTED IN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE. I WAS DISTRESSED ABOUT THIS AT FIRST, WITH THE HORROR I HAD OF ANYTHING SMACKING OF IDOLATRY. BUT JOAB INSISTED IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IDOLATRY, THOUGH OF COURSE THE GREEKS DID MAKE MANY IMAGES OF THEIR GODS AND GODDESSES. THIS WAS ART FOR ART'S SAKE, HE SAID, BEAUTY FOR BEAUTY'S SAKE. JOAB HAD STUDIED WITH A GREAT ARTIST IN ATHENS, AND WAS SHOWING SOME ABILITY FOR THIS SORT OF WORK. SO I GAVE MY CONSENT, ON HIS ASSURANCE THAT NONE OF THE THINGS HE MADE WOULD BE IN ANY SENSE OBJECTS OF WORSHIP. NOW IN GREECE HE MADE APPLICATION FOR A POSITION AS APPRENTICE WORKER WITH THE ARTIST COMMISSIONED TO MAKE DECORATIONS FOR THE NEW HANGING GARDENS, AS PEOPLE WERE BEGINNING TO CALL THEM. HE WAS STILL YOUNG TO ENTER THE UNIVERSITY, AND THIS SEEMED TO BE AN INTERESTING THING FOR HIM TO DO.

AND IN THE SPRING ALL OUR ATTENTION WENT INTO THE PREPARATIONS FOR OUR DAUGHTER'S WEDDING. "BEFORE LONG," I SAID TO JERUSHA, "WE'LL BE HAVING GRANDCHILDREN TOO."

YESHUA CAME HOME, JUST IN TIME FOR THE WEDDING. HE HAD BEEN OFFERED A PLACE AS ASSISTANT TO THE NEW EMBASSY THAT WAS JUST BEING ESTABLISHED IN SPARTA. HE WAS PLANNING TO GO BACK AT ONCE, BUT HE HAD PROMISED, AND SO HE HAD COME. ALSO, HE WAS LOOKING FOR A WIFE, AND IT DID NOT TAKE LONG FOR HIM TO FIND ONE, RACHEL, A DAUGHTER OF A LEVITE. BEFORE MID-SUMMER WE HAD WITNESSED ANOTHER WEDDING, AND THE YOUNG COUPLE WERE ON THEIR WAY TO SPARTA.

THE SERVANT

IN THE FALL OF THE YEAR FOLLOWING MANLAH'S WEDDING, JOAB ENTERED THE UNIVERSITY. HE WENT TO LIVE IN THE DORMITORY, THOUGH HE OFTEN VISITED US AT HOME. BUT JERUSHA AND I WERE JUST THE TWO OF US. IT WAS A YEAR AFTER THAT BEFORE I RECEIVED ANOTHER APPOINTMENT TO GO ABROAD. I DID ROUTINE WORK AT THE OFFICE, JERUSHA BUSIED HERSELF AT THINGS ABOUT THE HOUSE.

DURING THIS TIME I SELDOM SAW DANIEL. HE WAS IN A DIFFERENT DEPARTMENT, AND OUR PATHS DID NOT OFTEN CROSS. BUT ONE DAY, AS I WAS LEAVING THE OFFICE, HIS SON ISAIAH MET ME. HE HAD A SHEAF OF PAPERS IN HIS HAND.

"YOU'RE THE MAN I WANTED TO SEE," HE SAID. "YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE I CAN GET TO LISTEN TO MY POETRY."

"WHAT ABOUT YOUR FATHER?" I SAID. "WOULDN'T HE LISTEN?"

"OH, YES, HE LISTENS. AND SAYS, 'THAT'S GOOD, THAT'S VERY NICE,' OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. BUT ALL THE TIME I HAVE THE FEELING THAT HE HAS MISSED THE POINT OF WHAT I WAS TRYING TO SAY."

"I'LL BE GLAD TO TRY," I SAID. I HAD BELIEVED ALL ALONG THAT ISAIAH WAS REALLY A PROPHET, AND HAD TRIED TO ENCOURAGE HIM. "WHEN YOU GET HOME, COME ALONG AND GO WITH ME, AND LET'S SEE WHAT JERUSHA HAS BEEN UP TO. AND I THINK SHE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR THIS TOO."

HE WENT ALONG WITH ME, BUT PROMPTED THAT HE COULD NOT STAY FOR DINNER, THAT ROZAN AND THE CHILDREN WERE EXPECTING HIM.

JERUSHA WELCOMED HIM. SHE HAD ALWAYS BEEN FOND OF THE YOUNG MAN. "STILL NO HEAVENLY VOICES?" SHE ASKED.

"NO, NOT THAT WAY," HE SAID. "BUT I BELIEVE YAHWEH IS REALLY SPEAKING TO ME, IN MY HEART. ONLY SOMETIMES I AM NOT SURE WHAT HE IS SAYING TO ME."

ISAIAH SELECTED ONE OF THE MANY SHEETS OF PAPER. "I CALL THIS THE 'THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH'," HE SAID. "IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE YAHWEH SPEAKING," HE EXPLAINED. HE READ IT ALoud TO US.

"BEHOLD, MY SERVANT, WHOM I UPHOLD,

MY CHOSEN ONE. MY SOUL DELIGHTS IN HIM.

I HAVE PUT MY SPIRIT UPON HIM,

HE WILL BRING FORTH JUSTICE TO THE NATIONS.

HE WILL NOT SHOUT, NOR CRY ALoud,

OR UTTER A LOUD VOICE IN THE STREETS.

THE CRUSHED REED HE WILL NOT DESTROY,

NOR QUENCH THE FLICKERING LIGHT.

HE WILL BRING ABOUT TRUE JUSTICE,

HIS LIGHT WILL NOT FLICKER, NOR WILL HE BE CRUSHED,

UNTIL JUSTICE BE ESTABLISHED IN EARTH.

THE ISLANDS WAIT FOR HIS LAW.

"THUS SAYS GOD, YAHWEH,

WHO CREATED THE HEAVENS AND SPREAD THEM OUT,

WHO FORMED THE EARTH AND WHAT COMES FROM IT,

WHO GAVE BREATH TO ITS PEOPLE,

EVEN LIFE TO THE CREATURES THAT MOVE IN IT:

"I, YAHWEH, HAVE CALLED YOU IN RIGHTEOUSNESS,

I HAVE TAKEN YOU BY THE HAND AND FORMED YOU,

I HAVE GIVEN YOU AS A COVENANT TO THE PEOPLE,

A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS,

TO OPEN THE BLIND EYES, TO FREE PRISONERS FROM THE DUNGEON,

TO SET FREE FROM THE PRISON THOSE WHO LIVE IN DARKNESS."

"I AM YAHWEH, THAT IS MY NAME,

MY GLORY I WILL GIVE TO NO OTHER,

NOR MY HONOR TO GRAVEN IMAGES.

"BEHOLD, THE FORMER THINGS HAVE COME TO PASS,

NEW THINGS I NOW FORETELL.

BEFORE THEY HAPPEN I TELL YOU OF THEM."

WE SAT SILENT FOR A MOMENT AFTER HE CONCLUDED. FROM A LITERARY POINT OF VIEW THE POEM WAS A GEM, ITS SENTENCES WELL BALANCED, ITS PARALLELS VARIED AND FORCEFUL. AS TO WHAT IT MEANT.....

"WHO IS THIS SERVANT OF YAHWEH?" JERUSHA ASKED.

"IT IS YOU, AND I; IT IS THE WHOLE NATION OF ISRAEL," ISAIAH REPLIED.

"IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL," I SAID.

"I AM!" HE SAID. "BUT NOT JUST ONE INDIVIDUAL, OR AT LEAST NOT ONE THAT I KNOW OF NOW. ANYBODY WHO FEELS THAT HE IS A SERVANT OF YAHWEH FITS THE PICTURE MORE OR LESS. MAYBE SOME TIME THERE WILL BE ONE INDIVIDUAL WHO FITS IT MORE THAN ANY OTHER. I CAN'T TELL. ANYWAY, THAT'S THE WAY IT CAME TO ME."

JERUSHA WAS THOUGHTFUL. "IT SOUNDS LIKE SOMEBODY VERY HUMBLE," SHE SAID. "HE WILL NOT SHOUT, NOR CRY ALOUD....."

"SURELY HUMILITY IS FITTING FOR A SERVANT," ISAIAH SAID, ESPECIALLY THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH."

"AND THE CRUSHED REED," JERUSHA WENT ON, "THE ONLY THING A REED IS GOOD FOR IS TO BE STIFF, AND IF IT IS CRUSHED IT IS WORTHLESS. BUT STILL THE SERVANT DOES NOT CAST IT OUT. DOES THAT MEAN THAT WHEN PEOPLE — LIKE ISRAEL, HERE IN CAPTIVITY — APPEAR TO BE A TOTAL LOSS, YAHWEH STILL DOES NOT ABANDON US?"

"THAT'S RIGHT!" ISAIAH EXCLAIMED HAPPILY. "AND THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH IS LIKE YAHWEH HIMSELF. AND EVEN THE LIGHT THAT IS DARELY FLICKERING, READY TO GO OUT, HE DOESN'T SAY, 'BLOW IT OUT AND FORGET IT!' HE STILL CARES ABOUT IT."

"HUMBLE, BUT STILL STRONG," I SAID, MEDITATIVELY, "OPEN BLIND EYES, RELEASE THE PRISONERS — DO YOU MEAN RELEASING OUR NATION TO GO BACK TO THE HOMELAND, AS JEREMIAH FORETOLD?"

"YES, I MEANT THAT, AND MORE. LOOK, I HAVE WRITTEN ANOTHER ONE ABOUT THE SERVANT. I CALL IT 'THE POLISHED ARROW'." HE SHUFFLED THE SHEETS OF MANUSCRIPT AND FOUND THE ONE HE WANTED. "LISTEN TO THIS. IT IS THE SERVANT SPEAKING."

"LISTEN TO ME, O ISLANDS,
AND FAR DISTANT PEOPLES, HEarken TO ME,
YAHWEH CALLED ME BEFORE I WAS BORN,
FROM MY MOTHER'S WOMB HE CALLED ME BY NAME.

"HE MADE MY MOUTH LIKE A SHARP SWORD,
AND HID ME IN THE HOLLOW OF HIS HAND.
HE MADE ME A POLISHED ARROW,
IN HIS QUIVER HE HID ME AWAY.

"AND HE SAID TO ME, 'YOU ARE MY SERVANT,
ISRAEL, IN WHOM I WILL BE GLORIFIED.'
BUT I SAID, 'I HAVE TOILED IN VAIN,
I HAVE SPENT MY STRENGTH FOR NOTHING.
YET SURELY YAHWEH UPHELD MY RIGHT,
AND GOD HIMSELF IS MY REDEMPTION.'

"AND NOW YAHWEH SPEAKS AGAIN.
HE WHO FORMED ME IN THE WOMB TO BE HIS SERVANT,
TO BRING JACOB BACK TO HIM,
AND GATHER SCATTERED ISRAEL AGAIN TO HIM,
THUS I AM HONORED IN THE EYES OF YAHWEH,
THUS GOD BEHEMS MY STRENGTH.

"YAHWEH SAYS:

"TO BE MY SERVANT IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR YOU
TO RESTORE THE TRIBES OF JACOB
AND TO RENEW THOSE OF ISRAEL WHO SURVIVE;
I WILL MAKE YOU A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS,
THAT MY SALVATION MAY REACH TO THE END OF THE EARTH!"

WE SAT STUNNED BY THE GRANDEUR OF THE THOUGHT. FINALLY I SAID, "THAT IS REALLY GREAT POETRY — AND GREAT THEOLOGY TOO."

ISAIAH SHRUGGED. "I AM NOT CONCERNED WITH PRAISE," HE SAID. "YES, I KNOW IT IS GOOD POETRY. I HOPE MANY PEOPLE CAN COME TO READ IT AND APPRECIATE IT. RIGHT NOW, I KNOW THAT FEW PEOPLE WILL READ IT, AND FEW INDEED KNOW OR CARE WHAT IT IS ABOUT. BUT THIS IS WHAT YAHWEH PUT IT INTO MY HEART TO WRITE, AND I HAVE TO SAY IT — AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE."

"WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TOLD THAT ISRAEL IS GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE," JERUSAH SAID. "BUT IT IS A WONDERFUL THOUGHT THAT WHEN YAHWEH CHOSE US, WHEN HE CHOSE ABRAHAM, ABRAHAM'S SON ISAAC, AND JACOB, AND THE TRIBES, AND MOSES, AND SAMUEL, AND DAVID, AND ALL THE PROPHETS, IT WASN'T JUST FOR US TO BE A FAVORED PEOPLE, BUT SO THAT WE COULD BE THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH."

"RIGHT," ISAIAH SAID. "AND MORE THAN THAT, YAHWEH CHOSE US SO THAT THE LIGHT HE GIVES US CAN ULTIMATELY SHINE OUT TO ALL THE NATIONS, SO THAT ALL OF THEM CAN BE GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE TOO."

"BUT THERE ARE SO FEW THAT CAN GRASP THIS," I SAID. "LOOK AT OUR PEOPLE. SOME OF US DO TRY TO WORSHIP GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS, BUT A LOT OF US, OF US ISRAELITES, GIVE LITTLE HEED TO IT. A LOT OF THEM WOULD LIKE TO FORGET ABOUT BEING A CHOSEN PEOPLE, AND JUST BE LIKE THE OTHER NATIONS."

"OH, BUT HE WON'T LET US FORGET!" ISAIAH EXCLAIMED FIRMLY. "THAT IS WHY OUR PEOPLE HAVE HAD TO SUFFER ALL WE HAVE SUFFERED. PUNISHMENT FOR OUR SINS? YES, BUT NOT ONLY THAT. YAHWEH IS MAKING US INTO A POLISHED ARROW, A SHARP SWORD. IT TAKES A LOT OF GRINDING AND POLISHING, AND IT HURTS. BUT YAHWEH WILL NEVER GIVE UP ON US!"

THERE WERE TEARS IN HIS EYES AS HE ROSE TO GO — AND IN OURS, TOO.

ON BEGINNING MY SECOND YEAR AT THE UNIVERSITY, JOAB HAD TOLD US THAT HE HAD DECIDED TO MAJOR IN ARCHITECTURE. CONSIDERING THE GIFTS HE SEEMED TO HAVE, WE THOUGHT THAT WAS A WISE DECISION.

ONE REASON JOAB HAD CHOSEN FOR HIS DECISION TO LIVE IN THE DORMITORY RATHER THAN AT HOME WAS THAT HE MIGHT BE SENT AWAY ON ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT AT ANY TIME. AND SURE ENOUGH, IT WAS NOT LONG AFTER THE BEGINNING OF HIS SECOND YEAR THAT ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT CAME, AS I SHALL EXPLAIN. BUT IN THE MEANTIME, AN IMPORTANT EVENT OCCURRED, A SORT OF MILESTONE IN OUR LIVES — JOAB'S FIRST SON. HE WAS BORN AT THE CIRCUMCISION FEAST OF OUR FIRST GRANDSON. MIRIAM AND JERUSAH WERE THE PARENTS. THEY NAMED THE BOY HILKIAH.

"THIS IS OUR FIRST GRANDCHILD, SO FAR AS WE KNOW," I SAID. "BUT WE HAVE HEARD NOTHING FROM YESHUA SINCE HE TOOK HIS BRIDE AND SET OUT FOR SPARTA. IT HAS BEEN OVER A YEAR, THEY SAY HE HAS A CHILD BY NOW."

NOW I WAS A GRANDFATHER, I REFLECTED, AT FORTY-THREE. HOW THE YEARS HAD FLOWN!

THE WORK ON THE INCREDIBLE GARDENS WAS GOING FORWARD, NOW IN ITS THIRD YEAR, AND STILL FAR FROM COMPLETION. BUT THAT WAS ABOUT THE ONLY THING THAT WAS GOING FORWARD. THE KING WAS SO MUCH WRAPPED UP IN THIS PROJECT, AND IN HIS INFATUATION WITH HIS GRAND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, THAT HE WAS PRACTICALLY INACCESSIBLE TO ALL HIS GENERALS AND COUNSELORS. MANY PEOPLE WERE GRUMBLING BECAUSE PLEAS FOR IMPORTANT THINGS WENT UNHEEDED BY THE KING. NEDUCHADREZZAR HAD BEEN KING THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS, AND IN ALL THAT TIME HE HAD MAINTAINED A MARVELLOUS ORGANIZATION, EVERYTHING RIGHT AT HIS FINGER TIPS — ALWAYS UNTIL THE LAST THREE YEARS. NOW, IT SEEMED TO ME, THE EMPIRE WAS IN DANGER OF COLLAPSE, AND THE KING APPARENTLY GAVE IT NO THOUGHT.

THE MEDES WERE BECOMING A SERIOUS MENACE. NEDUCHADREZZAR'S ARMIES, CONSIDERED INVINCIBLE, HAD THUS FAR BEATEN BACK ALL INVASIONS; BUT EACH YEAR THE DETERMINED FLES WOULD ATTACK IN A NEW PLACE. NINEVEH, HARAN, AND SARDIS, WITH IMMENSE FORTIFICATIONS, WERE THOUGHT TO BE IMPREGNABLE, BUT EVEN THEIR PEOPLE TREMBLED WHEN INVADING ARMIES CAME EVER CLOSER BEFORE BEING REPULSED.

OUT OF THAT PERIOD OF GENERAL DISSATISFACTION CAME THE ATTEMPTED COUP. THE ELDEST SON, BEL-NASIR-APLU FORMED A CONSPIRACY TO ASSASSINATE THE KING AND SEIZE THE THRONE. THE PLOT WAS DISCOVERED JUST IN TIME, THE PRINCE WAS SLAIN, ALONG WITH SEVERAL NOBLES WHO WERE INVOLVED IN IT. THE NEXT TWO SONS, MARDUK-U-SHA-AD-KA-ANI AND SHAMASH-KARANI, WERE SUSPECTED OF COMPLICITY, BUT MADE THEIR ESCAPE, FLEEING TO ELAM. AND THEN IT WAS REPORTED, TO SOME PLACE FAR TO THE EAST.

ONE GOOD THING THAT CAME OF IT ALL WAS THAT THE KING, INSTEAD OF LEAVING THE QUESTION OF THE SUCCESSION DANGLING, CAME OUT OF HIS SECLUSION LONG ENOUGH TO MAKE A PROCLAMATION, NAMING EVIL-MARDUK AS HIS SUCCESSOR. THIS ANNOUNCEMENT WAS TANTALIZING TO NAMING THE PRINCE PRIME MINISTER. THE KING WENT BACK INTO HIS CONCERN WITH THE GARDENS, AND EVIL-MARDUK BEGAN TO GIVE ATTENTION TO SOME OF THE MULTITUDE OF THINGS THAT WERE IN URGENT NEED OF IT.

AND IN THE MIST OF IT ALL, EVIL-MARDUK SENT FOR ME. IT HAD BEEN LONG SINCE I HAD SEEN HIM. HE HAD GROWN CORPULENT, BUT STILL SEEMED STRONG AND VIGOROUS. I CONGRATULATED HIM ON HIS NEW STANDING.

"I WAS NOT SURPRISED AT WHAT MY BROTHERS DID," HE SAID. "IT WAS A PITY, BUT SEVERED TO CLEAR THE AIR SOMEWHAT. NOW MAYBE WE CAN TRY TO PUT THIS THING TOGETHER. IT HAS BEEN IN A PRETTY BAD MESS, AS I AM SURE YOU KNOW."

"WELL, I HAVE EYES AND EARS," I SAID.

HE LAUGHED. "BUT REALLY, IT ISN'T FUNNY," HE SAID.

I THOUGHT ABOUT JECONIAH. I KNEW HOW EVIL-MARDUK FELT ABOUT HIM. "DO YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO RELIEVE JECONIAH'S SITUATION SOME," I ASKED.

"NO," HE SAID, "DEFINITELY NOT! I KNOW HOW THE OLD MAN FEELS ABOUT HIM. HE MAY ACT LIKE HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON, BUT IF I TRIED THAT HE WOULD COME OUT OF HIS HIDING LIKE A BEAR OUT OF HIBERNATION. HE WOULD CERTAINLY HAVE JECONIAH PUT TO DEATH, AND MAYBE ME, TOO. HE WOULD PROBABLY BE GLAD OF AN EXCUSE TO HAVE ME OUT OF THE WAY SO THAT HE COULD MAKE NERGI THE HEIR. IF I EVER GET TO BE KING, YOU CAN COUNT ON ME FOR THAT, BUT NOW, NO."

HE HAD CALLED ME IN TO GIVE ME A NEW ASSIGNMENT. "I WANT YOU TO GO TO ANSHAN," HE SAID. "TU EGGATANA. HAVE YOU KNOW ABOUT THE PLACE?" "WELL, I KNOW THAT THE ISRAELITES, KING OF ANSHAN, SEEMS TO BE WORKING TOWARD UNITING THE TRIBES OF PERSIA — THE PARSIN, AS WE CALL THEM. DO YOU THINK HE MIGHT BE A USEFUL FOIL AGAINST THE ISRAELITES?"

"THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I WAS THINKING," HE SAID. "YOUR IDEAS AND MINE SEEM TO BE MOVING IN THE SAME DIRECTION. WITH A LITTLE ENCOURAGEMENT THOSE PEOPLE MIGHT BECOME VERY USEFUL TO US. I WANT YOU TO GO THERE AND STAY — STAY TILL I CALL YOU BACK. I'M GIVING YOU FULL AMBASSADORIAL AUTHORITY. I HAVE A COUPLE OF YOUNG FELLOWS THAT I AM SENDING AS YOUR STAFF. ONE OF THEM IS FLUENT IN PERSIAN. YOU KNOW SO MANY LANGUAGES — DO YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE STUDIED PERSIAN?"

"I'VE BEEN WORKING ON IT SOME IN MY SPARE TIME," I SAID. "I HAD AN IDEA IT MIGHT BE USEFUL. I THINK BY THE TIME I HAVE BEEN THERE A MONTH OR TWO I CAN GET ALONG PRETTY WELL WITH IT."

"SO MUCH THE BETTER," HE SAID. HE WENT ON TO TELL ME ABOUT ARRANGEMENTS. THE PLAN WAS FOR ME TO GO SOON AFTER MID-WINTER HOLIDAY. MEANWHILE MY TWO ASSISTANTS WOULD GO AHEAD, AND ARRANGE QUARTERS FOR THE EMBASSY, AND LIVING QUARTERS FOR US. "IT'S HIGH, THERE," HE SAID. "YOU MAY FIND THE WINTER A BIT ROUGH — BUT NOT LIKE ARMENIA," HE ADDED, LAUGHING.

"NO, NOT LIKE THAT, I HOPE," I SAID. AND I LAUGHED TOO.

CHEDAR WAS RIGHT IN MY WAY TO ANSHAN, AND I RESOLVED TO SPEND MY HOLIDAY THERE. JERUSHA SIGHED, WHEN I TOLD HER OF THE NEW ASSIGNMENT, AND COMPLAINED ABOUT ANOTHER MOVE; BUT SHE DROUGHTENED UP WHEN I TOLD HER ABOUT MY PROMOTION, WITH A SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE IN SALARY. AND I THINK SHE REALLY LOOKED FORWARD TO A NEW PLACE ALMOST AS EAGERLY AS I DID. WE GAVE UP THE LEASE ON THE HOUSE, HAD THE FURNITURE STORED, AND FREED ALL OUR SLAVES EXCEPT ONE. SHE WAS A MIDDLE AGED WIDOW, AN ISRAELITE, OF THE TRIBE OF NAPHTHALI. SHE SAID SHE HAD NOWHERE TO GO, AND GLADLY ACCEPTED PERPETUAL SERVITUDE BY THE ANCIENT CEREMONY OF PIERCING THE EAR WITH AN AWL. WE MADE A FAREWELL VISIT TO MAHLAH AND DILSHAN AND OUR GRANDCHILD. IT MIGHT WELL BE A LONG TIME BEFORE WE SHOULD SEE THEM AGAIN.

MY NEW RANK ENTITLED ME TO A CHARIOT. I ENGAGED A DRIVER, A YOUNG MAN WITH EXPERIENCE IN SUCH MATTERS. JOAB RODE WITH US TO CHEDAR, AND WE ENJOYED A PLEASANT HOLIDAY THERE WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS. IT WAS SADDENED SOMEWHAT BY THE CERTAINTY THAT MY FATHER HAD NOT LONG TO LIVE. AS WE LEARNED LATER, HE DIED IN THE FOLLOWING SPRING. HE WAS ONLY SIXTY-TWO.

BEFORE LEAVING FOR MY NEW PLACE I VISITED EZEKIEL. HE SEEMED TO BE HAVING ONE OF HIS VISIONS. "I AM LOOKING AT GOD'S HIGH PRIEST!" HE EXCLAIMED AS HE GREETED ME.

"SURELY NOT," I SAID. "IT CAN HARDLY BE SOON ENOUGH FOR THAT. BUT IF YAHWEH SHOULD WILL IT SO, MY SON YESHUA MAY BE."

HIS FACE CLOUDED, THEN LIT UP AGAIN. "YES," HE SAID, "PERHAPS YOU ARE RIGHT. YES," HE SAID AGAIN, "YES, THAT MUST BE RIGHT." MY SPINE TINGLED WITH THE IDEA.

WHEN WE ARRIVED IN EGGATANA THE CITY LAY UNDER A HEAVY BLANKET OF SNOW. THE WEATHER WAS SEVERE. MY ASSISTANTS HAD DONE WELL IN PREPARING FOR OUR ARRIVAL. THEY HAD SECURED A HOUSE WORTHY OF THE DIGNITY OF AN AMBASSADOR, WITH FURNISHINGS, AND SERVANTS, INCLUDING ONE FLUENT IN ARAMAIC.

WITH THE HELP OF THIS DRAMAIC SPEAKING SERVANT, AND MY ASSISTANT WHO WAS FLUENT IN PERSIAN, AND MY FLAIR FOR LANGUAGES, I WAS ABLE TO GET ALONG, AND WITHIN A SHORT TIME I HAD A FAIR SPEAKING KNOWLEDGE OF PERSIAN. (IT WAS A YEAR BEFORE JERUSHA WAS ABLE TO FEEL COMFORTABLE IN A SOCIAL GATHERING. BUT THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE WAS ANOTHER PROBLEM. THEY USED A CUNEIFORM SCRIPT, BUT DIFFERENT FROM THAT USED BY THE AKKADIANS. SOME OF THE SIGNS HAD APPROXIMATELY THE SAME SYLLABIC VALUE, BUT MANY WERE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT. FORTUNATELY I HAD A SECRETARY WHO WAS FLUENT IN AKKADIAN, AND I WAS ABLE TO ADJUST TO THE SITUATION.

ECCATANA WAS A GROWING CAPITAL. THERE WAS LITTLE OF THE SPLENDOR OF BAD-EL, THE PALACES AND OTHER BUILDINGS WERE MUCH SIMPLER, BUT AN ATTITUDE OF PROGRESS AND SUCCESS PERVADED EVERYTHING. SEVERAL NATIONS HAD ENVOIS THERE, EGYPT, ETHIOPIA, SHEDA, SCYTHIA, AND OTHERS. HITHERTO THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PLACE HAD NOT BEEN RECOGNIZED BY BAD-EL, ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE SENILITY OF NEDUCHADREZZAR. HE HAD CONSIDERED PERSIA A PIECE OF MEDIA, AND ANSHAN AN UN-IMPORTANT PART OF PERSIA, NOT WORTHY OF ANY ATTENTION. OR, MORE PROBABLY, IN HIS INFATUATION HE HAD NOT EVEN THOUGHT OF WHAT AT ALL. IT WAS PLAIN TO ME THAT THIS WAS A SIGNIFICANT PLACE. I WAS GLAD THAT CYRUS-HAROUK HAD BEEN ABLE TO SEE IT.

IN DUE TIME I WAS GRANTED AN AUDIENCE BY KING THEISPUS, AT WHICH POLITE PLATITUDES WERE SPOKEN ON BOTH SIDES. AT LENGTH I CAME TO KNOW MOST OF THE DIPLOMATIC PERSONNEL. BY MID-SUMMER I WAS BEGINNING TO FEEL THAT I KNEW WHAT I WAS DOING.

I WAS NOT GREATLY SURPRISED TO DISCOVER THAT THERE WERE A NUMBER OF ISRAELITES IN THE CITY. SOME HAD COME FROM CHENAR, SOME FROM NINEVEH, BAD-EL, AND OTHER PLACES. MY PEOPLE HAD A WAY OF GETTING AROUND. VERY FEW OF THEM WERE ABLE TO SPEAK HEBREW, BUT ALMOST ALL OF THEM SPEAK DRAMAIC. SOME WERE DESCENDANTS OF THE PEOPLE CARRIED OFF FROM SAMARIA BY SHALMANESER, ALMOST TWO CENTURIES AGO. I TOOK STEPS TO ORGANIZE THEM INTO A KENESHET, AND INSTITUTED REGULAR WORSHIP SERVICES ON THE SABBATH DAYS. I HAD BROUGHT WITH ME SOME OF THE SACRED BOOKS, AND ONE YOUNG MAN WHO SHOWED MORE ABILITY THAN THE OTHERS I EMPLOYED TO TEACH THE PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY THE YOUTH, SOMETHING OF THE LAW AND TRADITIONS OF OUR PEOPLE.

I HAD HEARD SOME TALK OF CYRUS, THE KING'S SON. HE WAS AWAY, LEADING THE ARMY IN A CAMPAIGN AGAINST ELAM. IT WAS THE THIRD WINTER IN ECCATANA THAT I FINALLY HAD OPPORTUNITY FOR AN INTERVIEW WITH HIM.

THE CONQUEST OF ELAM WAS COMPLETE, AND CYRUS WAS RESIDING IN ECCATANA.

BY THIS, AND OTHER RECENT CONQUESTS, THE SIZE AND INFLUENCE OF PERSIA WERE SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASED. PEOPLE WERE SPEAKING OF THE MEDES AND PERSIANS, AS IF THEY WERE TWO EQUAL AND AUTONOMOUS NATIONS, WHICH INDEED THEY WERE, TO ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES, THOUGH ESPECIALLY PERSIA WAS CONSIDERED SUBJECT TO THE POWERFUL MEDIA.

I REQUESTED AN INTERVIEW WITH CYRUS, AND IT WAS GRANTED. I FOUND HIM VERY FRIENDLY, AND INTERESTED TO KNOW ABOUT MY ORIGINS AND MY PEOPLE. "I HAVE HEARD," HE SAID, "THAT YOU ARE NOT NATIVE TO BAD-ELU, BUT ARE A HEBREW, OR A JUDAHITE, AS SOME SAY. IS THAT CORRECT?"

"YES," I SAID, "I AM OF THAT PEOPLE. THERE WERE TWELVE TRIBES, ALL DESCENDED FROM OUR GREAT ANCESTOR, ISRAEL, OR JACOB. JUDAH IS THE LARGEST OF THOSE TRIBES. I AM OF ANOTHER TRIBE, THE TRIBE OF LEVI."

"AND BECAUSE JUDAH IS THE ONLY TRIBE YOU ARE ALL CALLED JUDAHITES?"

"YES. SOME PEOPLE SHORTEN IT BY AND SAY JEWS. HEBREW IS OUR LANGUAGE. THE TRIBAL STRUCTURE HAS BEEN SO SERIOUSLY DAMAGED BY WAR THAT IT HARDLY EXISTS ANY MORE, EXCEPT THAT MY TRIBE, THE PRIESTLY TRIBE, HAS MANAGED TO KEEP ITS IDENTITY. SO PEOPLE CALL US ALL JUDAHITES, OR JEWS."

"AND YOUR PEOPLE WERE CONQUERED BY NEBUCHADREZZAR, MANY YEARS AGO, AND BROUGHT OVER HERE AND SETTLED ALONG THE GREAT RIVER. IS THAT RIGHT?"

"THAT IS A FACT," I SAID. "I MIGHT NOT QUITE AGREE THAT IT IS RIGHT."

HE LAUGHED. "AND HOW DOES IT HAPPEN THAT YOU, ONE OF A SUBJECT PEOPLE, HOLD SUCH A HIGH POSITION IN THE GOVERNMENT OF NEBUCHADREZZAR?"

"I CAME TO BABYLON WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN YEARS OLD," I REPLIED. "I DO REMEMBER MY FORMER HOME, BUT THIS HAS BEEN MY HOME IN ALL MY ADULT LIFE. I WAS GIVEN OPPORTUNITY TO STUDY AND ADVANCE MYSELF, AND I COUNT MYSELF A CLOSE FRIEND OF CROWN PRINCE EVIL-MARDUK."

"AND WHAT ABOUT THE LAND YOU CAME FROM, FAR IN THE WEST. DO ANY OF YOUR PEOPLE STILL LIVE THERE?"

"A FEW STRAGGLERS, I HEAR," I SAID. "I AM TOLD THAT THE CITY OF JERUSALEM, OUR OLD CAPITAL, WHERE I SPENT MY CHILDHOOD, IS ONLY A MASS OF RUINS. IT MAKES ME SAD TO THINK ABOUT IT."

"HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF GOING BACK?"

"THERE IS A PROPHECY IN OUR SACRED BOOKS," I SAID, "THAT OUR PEOPLE WILL ONE DAY GO BACK AND REBUILD THAT CITY, WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD, YAHWEH. I BELIEVE IT IS A TRUE PROPHECY, BUT DO NOT KNOW WHETHER IT WILL HAPPEN IN MY LIFETIME."

"AND YOU DO FEEL YOURSELF LOYAL TO THE GOVERNMENT OF NEBUCHADREZZAR?"

"OF COURSE," I SAID. "IT IS THE ONLY GOVERNMENT I HAVE."

I CONGRATULATED HIM ON HIS SUCCESSSES.

"YES," HE AGREED, "BY THE HELP OF MY GOD AHURMAZDA I HAVE ATTAINED SOME SUCCESSSES. AND I HOPE WITH HIS HELP TO DO STILL MORE."

ONE THING ABOUT THE PERSIANS — THEY ARE NOT GROSS IDOLATERS, LIKE THE PEOPLE OF BABYLON. THEY BELIEVE IN A SPIRITUAL BEING. THEY REVERENCE THE STARS, AND FIRE, BUT INSIST THEY DO NOT WORSHIP THEM. BUT THEY DO BELIEVE IN A GOD OF GOOD, AHURMAZDA, AND AN OPPOSING GOD OF EVIL, CALLED ANHRIMAN. I NOTE THAT SOME OF OUR PEOPLE HAVE BEEN INFLUENCED BY THAT IDEA, AND WHEN THEY HAVE MISFORTUNES THEY ATTRIBUTE THEM TO A POWER OF EVIL, WHICH THEY PREFER TO AS SATAN.

WE STAYED SEVEN YEARS IN BABYLON. IT WAS A DELIGHTFUL PLACE TO LIVE, AND WE CAME TO LIKE THE PEOPLE AND THEIR CUSTOMS. DURING MUCH OF THIS TIME CYRUS WAS AWAY, IN HIS MILITARY CAMPAIGNS, RESULTING IN THE EXPANSION OF HIS COUNTRY TO THE EAST, AS FAR AS THE GREAT INDUS RIVER. BUT WHEN, OCCASIONALLY, CYRUS FOUND TIME TO SPEND A FEW WEEKS IN THE CAPITAL, WE OFTEN HAD HIM AS A GUEST IN OUR HOME. WE HAD MANY DISCUSSIONS, OFTEN DISAGREEING IN OUR IDEAS, BUT STILL FRIENDLY. IN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS WE WERE NOT IN FULL AGREEMENT, BUT MANY BASIC IDEAS WERE SIMILAR, SUCH AS BELIEF IN ONLY ONE GOD; AND OUR MORAL CODES WERE NOT SO FAR APART. THE IDEA THAT SEEMED STRANGEST TO CYRUS WAS THAT OUR GOD, YAHWEH, HAD CHOSEN OUR PEOPLE TO BE HIS SPECIAL PEOPLE. I SHOWED HIM OUR SACRED BOOKS, AND TRANSLATED PORTIONS OF THEM FOR HIM. OF COURSE THEY LOST A GOOD BIT IN TRANSLATION, BUT STILL HE WAS IMPRESSED. AND I READ ISAIAH'S POEM ABOUT THE POLISHED ARROW TO HIM. HE ADMITTED THAT THAT WAS TRULY A GRAND CONCEPT.

AND OF COURSE WE TALKED OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS. CYRUS WAS WELL INFORMED ABOUT WHAT HAD BEEN GOING ON OF THE GREAT CONQUESTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF ASSYRIA, AND OF HOW NABOPOLASSAR, ALMOST FIFTY YEARS BEFORE, HAD OVERTHROWN ASSYRIA AND REESTABLISHED BABYLON, THE ANCIENT CAPITAL, AS THE SEAT OF THE EMPIRE.

"NEBUCHADREZZAR BUILT UP A MARVELOUS ORGANIZATION," CYRUS SAID, "BUT FROM WHAT I HEAR HE SEEMS TO BE GETTING SOFT IN HIS OLD AGE."

I MADE NO COMMENT ON THAT. EVEN OFF THE RECORD, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN INAPPROPRIATE. BUT I AM SURE CYRUS KNEW HOW I FELT ABOUT IT.

CYRUS REMEMBERED OUR CONVERSATION ABOUT OUR HOPE THAT OUR PEOPLE MIGHT GO BACK SOME DAY AND REBUILD JERUSALEM. "SUPPOSE YOU DID GO BACK," HE SAID, "WHAT WOULD BE YOUR AIM? WOULD YOU TRY TO ESTABLISH YOUR NATION AS AN INDEPENDENT POWER, OR WOULD YOU BE CONTENT TO BE A PART OF THE AKKADIAN EMPIRE?"

"EMPIRES ARE A FACT OF LIFE IN THESE DAYS," I TOLD HIM. "OUR NATION WAS INDEPENDENT AT ONE TIME, EVEN BECAME AN IMPORTANT POWER. BUT BETWEEN THE VASTLY SUPERIOR FORCES OF EGYPT AND ASSYRIA WE HAD A HARD TIME MAINTAINING ANY semblance OF INDEPENDENCE. WHAT BROUGHT ABOUT OUR RUIN WAS THAT OUR RULERS PROMISED TO BE LOYAL TO NEBUCHADREZZAR, AND ALL THE WHILE WERE TRYING TO GET BETTER TERMS OUT OF EGYPT. EGYPT PROMISED MUCH, AND DID LITTLE. NEBUCHADREZZAR WARNED OUR PEOPLE ONCE, AND WHEN OUR PEOPLE REBELLED AGAIN HE DESTROYED THE PLACE ALTOGETHER. IT WAS SEVERE, BUT I GUESS WE HAD IT COMING TO US."

"YES, EMPIRES ARE A FACT OF LIFE," CYRUS SAID THOUGHTFULLY.

"THE IDEA OF EMPIRE THAT THE ASSYRIANS HAD," I SAID, "WAS TO DESTROY THE NATIONAL FEELINGS OF PEOPLES BY SHIFTING THEM AROUND. BUT SUPPOSE THAT AN EMPIRE WERE TO BE SET UP ON A BASIS OF GOOD WILL, THE SMALL NATIONS BEING ENCOURAGED TO PRESERVE THEIR NATIONAL SPIRIT, WHILE BEING PART OF A GREAT EMPIRE. DO YOU SUPPOSE SUCH A PLAN MIGHT EVER WORK OUT?"

CYRUS SAT THINKING FOR A WHILE BEFORE SPEAKING. "YOU KNOW," HE SAID AT LAST, "IT REALLY MIGHT. IT'S AN IDEA WORTH THINKING ABOUT."

CORRUPTION

IT WAS ON MY FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY THAT MY REPLACEMENT ARRIVED, BEARING THE OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION THAT I WAS RECALLED TO BABYLON. I HAD ALREADY RECEIVED INFORMAL NOTICE OF IT SOME TIME BEFORE. WE HAD BEEN HAPPY IN ECBATANA, AND THE THOUGHT OF RETURNING TO THE HOT AND MUDDY CLIMATE OF THE LOWLANDS WAS NOT APPEALING. HOWEVER, IT WAS HOME, AND ANYWAY, ORDERS WERE ORDERS.

FIRST WE WENT TO CHEDAR FOR A FEW DAYS VISIT. CHEDAR HAD GROWN TO BE A SIZEABLE CITY. SHIMEATH WAS ONE OF THE PR. SPERGUS MERCHANTS. ALL OF OUR PEOPLE HAD PROSPERED WELL. TIME WAS MARCHING ON. MOTHER WAS STILL BALE AND HEARTY AT SIXTY-NINE. A LETTER RECENTLY RECEIVED FROM YESHUA TOLD OF THE BIRTH OF HIS THIRD CHILD. THAT MADE NINE GRANDCHILDREN FOR US, AS MARLAN NOW HAD FOUR, AND JOAD, MARRIED AND LIVING IN THE CAPITAL, HAD TWO.

I VISITED BREXIEL. HE WAS NOT VERY OLD, SIXTY-ONE I THOUGHT, BUT HE SEEMED VERY FEEDLE. HIS DAUGHTER TOLD US HE WAS STILL DOING SOME WRITING OCCASIONALLY, AND SHE WAS SAVING EVERYTHING HE WROTE.

WHILE IN CHEDAR WE HEARD MUCH TALK OF THE SPLENDOR OF THE HANGING GARDENS, AS THEY WERE CALLED. THERE WAS MUCH GRUMBLING ABOUT THE COST OF THIS PROJECT, AND THE INCREASE IN TAXES THAT HAD BEEN LEVIED BECAUSE OF IT.

AS WE APPROACHED THE CAPITAL, THE FIRST THING WE SAW WAS THE MAGNIFICENT GARDEN, OR MOUNTAIN, OR PALACE, OR WHATEVER ONE MIGHT CALL IT. WE HAD HEARD THAT IT WAS A GLORIOUS SIGHT, BUT WE WERE NOT PREPARED FOR THE SPLENDOR OF IT. WE SAW IT FIRST IN LATE AFTERNOON, THE WESTERN SUN GLEAMING ON THE MARBLE, AND GOLD, AND LAPIS LAZULI, INTERSPERSED WITH TREES AND FLOWERING PLANTS. IT FAR SURPASSED THE ZIGGURAT IN HEIGHT AND BEAUTY. THERE WERE STAIRWAYS, COLONNADES, AND LOVELY LITTLE BUILDINGS, GEMS OF ARCHITECTURAL BEAUTY, AND NEAR THE SUMMIT THE LARGEST OF THESE, WHICH WE LEARNED WAS CALLED THE PRINCESS'S NUK. WE SPOKE OF THE FACT THAT OUR SON JOAD AND OUR SON-IN-LAW BILSHAN HAD HAD A PART IN ITS CONSTRUCTION, AND THAT MADE US FEEL VERY PROUD. WE LEARNED THAT THE STRUCTURE HAD BEEN BUILT OF BRICK, STONE AND EARTH, ARRANGED SO THAT ALL OVER THE EXTERIOR SURFACES WERE SPACES FILLED WITH SOIL, IN WHICH HAD BEEN PLANTED SHRUBS AND FLOWERS, EVEN GOLD SIZED TREES. AN INGENUOUS ARRANGEMENT HAD BEEN MADE FOR RAISING WATER FROM THE RIVER TO A TANK AT THE SUMMIT, FROM WHICH WATER DESCENDED IN RUNNELS AND CASCADES AND FOUNTAINS TO WATER ALL THE TERRACES. BETWEEN THE GROVES AND FLOWER BEDS WERE SHADY WALKWAYS, AND PLATFORMS FROM WHICH MAGNIFICENT VIEWS OF THE CITY AND THE SURROUNDING COUNTRYSIDE MIGHT BE OBSERVED. ALL OF THIS HAD BEEN DEDICATED TO THE PRINCESS NITOCRIS, AND HER GODDESS ISHTAR. THE COST OF IT ALL MUST HAVE BEEN STAGGERING.

AS SOON AS WE COULD GET A HOUSE, AND BEGIN TO REORGANIZE OUR LIFE, I REQUESTED AN INTERVIEW WITH EVIL-MARDOUK. I WANTED TO GIVE HIM MY REPORT ON MY ACTIVITIES IN ANSHAN. OF COURSE I HAD BEEN SENDING WRITTEN REPORTS, BUT I WANTED TO REPORT IN PERSON.

EVIL-MARDOUK RECEIVED ME INFORMALLY. A BOY ELEVEN OR TWELVE YEARS OLD WAS WITH HIM, WHOM HE INTRODUCED AS HIS GRANDSON, NASU NA'ID.

"THIS MAN MAY BE YOUR TEACHER ONE DAY, NASIDU," HE SAID. THIS WAS NEWS TO ME, FOR I HAD NEVER THOUGHT OF A TEACHING CAREER. NASU NA'ID SEEMED A BRIGHT BOY, AND I THOUGHT IT MIGHT WELL BE AN AGREEABLE EXPERIENCE TO HAVE HIM AS A PUPIL. AFTER A SHORT CONVERSATION IN WHICH HE SHOWED MUCH INTEREST IN WHERE I HAD BEEN, THE BOY EXCUSED HIMSELF AND WITHDREW.

"THAT'S A BRIGHT LAD," I REMARKED.

"TRUE," EVIL-MARDOUK REPLIED. "HE IS HIGHLY GIFTED, BUT UNLESS HE CHANGES A LOT HE WILL NEVER BE A STATESMAN — TOO BOOKISH."

"MAYBE HE'LL NEVER NEED TO BE," I SAID. "YOU WILL LIVE A LONG LIFE, AND NENGAL-SHAREZER LONG AFTER THAT. BY THE TIME HIS TURN COMES TO REIGN, SURELY HE WILL HAVE ACQUIRED SOME SENSE OF STATECRAFT." BUT EVEN AS I SAID IT, I WONDERED. I HAD ALREADY NOTED THAT EVIL-MARDOUK WAS OVER WEIGHT, AND HIS COLOR WAS NOT GOOD.

"THAT IS IN THE HANDS OF THE GODS," HE ANSWERED. "I DON'T FEEL MUCH LIKE A STATESMAN MYSELF — MORE LIKE AN OFFICE BOY." HE LAUGHED. "NERGI IS A SOLDIER, THROUGH AND THROUGH. BUT IF HE EVER GETS TO BE KING, THE ONE WHO RULES WILL BE NITOCRIS, YOU CAN COUNT ON THAT! BUT, OFFICE BOY OR WHATEVER, MY TURN IS COMING SOON."

"REALLY?"

"OFFICIALLY, IT IS A SECRET, BUT MY FATHER HAS BEEN IN A COMA FOR THREE DAYS. HIS PHYSICIANS ASSURE ME THAT HE CANNOT LAST THE WEEK OUT."

"I AM SURE YOU WILL MAKE A GREAT KING," I SAID.

"I DON'T KNOW. I DREAD THE RESPONSIBILITY," HE SAID. "WE TALKED FOR A WHILE ABOUT MY EXPERIENCE IN PERSIS. I TOLD HIM OF MY CONVERSATION WITH CYRUS, REGARDING THE IDEA OF BUILDING AN EMPIRE, NOT ON TERROR, BUT ON GOOD WILL AMONG THE VARIOUS NATIONALITIES INVOLVED."

"TERROR SEEMED TO WORK PRETTY WELL FOR FATHER," HE SAID. "EVEN AT THAT HE WAS MUCH MORE CONSIDERATE THAN THE ASSYRIAN KINGS — SHALMANESER, OR EVEN ASSHUR-DANI-APLU. BUT IF AN EMPIRE COULD BE BUILT ON GOOD WILL, IT WOULD BE MUCH MORE SECURE THAN ONE BUILT ON TERROR. I'LL HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT."

"CYRUS IS A MAN YOU NEED TO WATCH," I SAID. "WHEN HE GETS TO BE KING, HE IS REALLY GOING TO START THINGS MOVING. AND IT WON'T BE LONG, EITHER. HIS FATHER IS GETTING MIGHTY OLD."

"IF WE CAN JUST KEEP THE PERSIANS AND THE MEDES FIGHTING ONE ANOTHER, WE WILL HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM EITHER OF THEM," EVIL-MARDUK SAID. "BUT IF THEY EVER UNITE, WE WILL BE IN REAL TROUBLE."

"THAT REMARK YOU MADE ABOUT MY BEING A TEACHER," I SAID. "WERE YOU SERIOUS ABOUT THAT?"

"YES, I WAS," HE SAID. "IT JUST OCCURRED TO ME A WHILE BACK, YOU HAVE BEEN TRAIPSING AROUND IN FOREIGN PARTS ALL THESE YEARS, HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO SETTLE DOWN AND BE A PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY?"

"I HAD NOT THOUGHT OF SUCH A THING," I SAID. "BUT IT MIGHT BE AN INTERESTING CAREER. I AM SURE MY WIFE WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A SETTLED HOME, INSTEAD OF HAVING TO PACK UP AND MOVE SO MANY TIMES."

"ONE OF OUR PROFESSORS IS RETIRING, AND I DON'T KNOW WHERE WE WOULD FIND ANOTHER WITH YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF EGYPTIAN AND GREEK, AND A LOT OF OTHER THINGS. CONSIDER YOURSELF APPOINTED, AND PREPARE TO BEGIN WHEN CLASSES OPEN IN THE FALL."

NEWS OF THE KING'S DEATH WAS BROADCAST BY CRIERS GOING THROUGH THE STREETS, AND RIDERS ON SWIFT STEEDS GOING OUT TO ALL PARTS OF THE EMPIRE. EVIL-MARDUK WOULD BEGIN ACTING AS KING IMMEDIATELY, BUT THE CORONATION WOULD NOT BE UNTIL AFTER A MONTH OF OFFICIAL MOURNING.

ALL THE CITY WAS IN DEEP MOURNING. THE FUNERAL ACTIVITIES LASTED MANY DAYS, WITH PROCESSIONS, REGIMENTS OF SOLDIERS MARCHING, PRIESTS AND ACOLYTES CARRYING IMAGES OF INNUMERABLE GODS AND GODDESSES. TRULY, NESUCHADREZZAR HAD BEEN A GREAT KING. HE HAD REIGNED FORTY-SIX YEARS, IN AN ERA OF GREAT PROSPERITY AND SUCCESS.

AND AFTER ALL THE CEREMONIES OF THE MOURNING PERIOD, THERE BEGAN THE FESTIVITIES OF THE CORONATION. THERE WERE MORE PROCESSIONS, NOT MOURNFUL THIS TIME, BUT JOYFUL. EVIL-MARDUK WAS JUST MY AGE. HE LOOKED REGAL IN HIS MAGNIFICENT ROYAL ROBES. I HAD TO MARCH IN THE PROCESSION TOO, IN MY NEW ROLE AS PROFESSOR; ALL THE FUNCTIONARIES OF THE STATE UNIVERSITY HAD THEIR SPECIAL PLACE IN THE CORONATION CEREMONIES. AND OUR WIVES, WHILE NOT INCLUDED IN THE PROCESSIONS, DID HAVE RESERVED SEATS AT THE CORONATION.

NEW OFFICIALS WERE APPOINTED, AND INVESTED WITH THEIR ROBES OF OFFICE. NERGAL-SHANEZER WAS DESIGNATED AS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ARMY, AND AS THE KING'S SUCCESSOR. A NEW MAN WAS PUT IN AS SECRETARY OF STATE, A MAN WHOM I KNEW, AND HAD NO LIKING FOR. I WAS GLAD I HAD ACCEPTED THE APPOINTMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY, AND WOULD NOT HAVE TO WORK UNDER HIM.

NOT LONG AFTER THE CROWNATION THE KING SENT FOR ME. HE TOLD ME THAT HE WAS NOW READY TO FULFIL HIS PROMISE TO SET JECONIAH FREE. I HAD BEEN HOPING THAT HE STILL REMEMBERED THAT PROMISE, BUT IT WAS NOT FOR ME TO REMIND HIM OF IT. HE ISSUED A PUBLIC PROCLAMATION. AT THE SAME TIME HE FREED THE OTHER CAPTIVE KINGS. THERE WERE ONLY FIVE LEFT ALIVE OF ALL THOSE KINGS MADE STATE PRISONERS SO LONG AGO. THEY WERE ALL SET FREE, BUT JECONIAH WAS THE ONLY ONE RAISED TO THE DIGNITY OF A CLIENT KING, AND GIVEN A SEAT AT THE KING'S TABLE. JECONIAH WAS NOT MUCH OLDER THAN I, BUT THIRTY-SIX YEARS AS A STATE PRISONER HAD LEFT HIM DRUNKEN AND DEJECTED. THIS NEW DIGNITY DID MUCH TO RAISE HIS SPIRITS. ALL OF OUR PEOPLE WERE HAPPY ABOUT IT TOO, ESPECIALLY HIS SONS, SHEALTIEL AND BILSHAN.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

WHILE WE WERE IN ECBATANA I CHANCED TO SEE IN THE SLAVE MARKET A YOUNG MAN WHOSE FACE SEEMED UNUSUALLY INTELLIGENT, AND ON IMPULSE I DECIDED TO BUY HIM. HE PROVED TO BE A VERY CAPABLE CHARACTEER, AND USEFUL ABOUT THE HOUSE AND GARDENS AS WELL. JERUSAH WAS PLEASSED WITH HIM. HIS NAME WAS SAR-VEG, HE TOLD ME IN BROKEN PERSIAN. HE HAD BEEN AN ELAMITE SOLDIER, THOUGH HE WAS NOT AN ELAMITE, BUT OF A SUBJECT PEOPLE TO ELAM. AS A PRISONER OF WAR, HE WAS SOLD INTO SLAVERY. THAT WAS RECKONED AS ONE OF THE ACCEPTED HAZARDS OF WARFARE. WE TREATED HIM WELL, AND I PROMISED HIM THAT I WOULD GIVE HIM HIS FREEDOM AFTER HE HAD SERVED ME SEVEN YEARS.

WHEN SAR-VEG HAD BEEN WITH US ABOUT THREE MONTHS, HE APPROACHED ME. I NOTED THAT HIS COMMAND OF THE PERSIAN TONGUE WAS IMPROVING RAPIDLY. "MASTER," HE SAID, "IF MY SERVICE IS PLEASING TO YOU, I WOULD LIKE TO ASK A GREAT FAVOR."

I WONDERED WHAT WAS COMING, BUT TOLD HIM TO SPEAK UP.

"IF I HAD A WIFE," HE SAID, "I WOULD BE VERY HAPPY IN THIS SERVICE. IF YOU COULD BUY A WIFE FOR ME, I WOULD BE WILLING TO SERVE AN ADDITIONAL SEVEN YEARS FOR HER."

I THOUGHT ABOUT OUR ANCESTOR JACOB, SERVING FOURTEEN YEARS FOR TWO WIVES. HIS REQUEST SEEMED REASONABLE, AND WE COULD USE ANOTHER WOMAN IN THE HOUSE. I TALKED TO JERUSAH ABOUT IT, AND SHE WAS ALL FOR IT. SHE DECIDED TO GO WITH US TO THE SLAVE MARKET, AND HELP WITH THE SELECTION.

SO THE THREE OF US WENT TOGETHER. THE SELECTION DID NOT TAKE LONG. THE FIRST GIRL WE LOOKED AT PROVED TO BE A NATIVE OF SAR-VEG'S OWN COUNTRY, WHO SPOKE NO PERSIAN, BUT WHEN SAR-VEG SPOKE TO HER IN HER MOTHER TONGUE HER PLEASURE WAS SO GREAT THAT OUR HEARTS WERE TOUCHED. SHE APPEARED TO BE ABOUT FOURTEEN OR FIFTEEN YEARS OLD, AND THE DEALER ASSURED ME THAT SHE WAS A VIRGIN, WHICH GAVE HIM AN EXCUSE TO DOUBLE THE STANDARD PRICE. JERUSAH FELT VERY MOTHERLY TOWARD THE GIRL, AND AFTER HAGGLING FOR SOME TIME WITH THE DEALER I BOUGHT HER, PAYING MORE THAN ONE WOULD NORMALLY PAY FOR SLAVE.

THERE SEEMED TO BE NO PROVISION FOR THE LEGAL MARRIAGE OF SLAVES, BUT JERUSAH BOUGHT HER SOME CLOTHES -- SHE WAS, PRACTICALLY NAKED -- AND WE MADE A MODEST WEDDING FEAST FOR THEM, AND INSTALLED THEM IN A CABIN WITHIN OUR COMPOUND.

THE GIRL'S NAME WAS CARI-LA, AND SHE PROVED TO BE A LOYAL AND SKILLFUL SERVANT. NINE MONTHS LATER SHE GAVE BIRTH TO A FIRST SON. AT MY SUGGESTION, STILL THINKING OF JACOB, THEY ADOPTED THE NAME REUBEN FOR HIM, AND I CIRCUMCISED HIM, AFTER THE CUSTOM OF OUR PEOPLE. REUBEN WAS A YEAR OLD, AND ANOTHER WELL ON THE WAY WHEN WE RETURNED TO DAB-EL. THEY WERE THE ONLY SERVANTS WE TOOK BACK TO DAB-EL WITH US.

WHEN I TOLD JERUSHA OF MY APPOINTMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY SHE WAS HAPPY. "NOW LET'S BUILD A HOUSE, AND REALLY SETTLE DOWN," SHE SAID. AND IT SO HAPPENED THAT ONE OF OUR COUNTRYMEN HAD BOUGHT A TRACT OF LAND BY THE RIVER, ABOUT AN HOUR'S WALK FROM THE CITY, AND WAS SUBDIVIDING IT INTO HOME SITES, OFFERING THEM FIRST TO ISRAELITES. WE CHOSE A SITE WITH DATE PALMS, FIG TREES AND POMEGRANATES, NEAR THE RIVER, BUT HIGH ENOUGH TO BE ABOVE FLOOD WATERS. DIPPING INTO OUR ACCUMULATED SAVINGS, WE ENGAGED A CARPENTER TO BUILD A HOUSE, NOT LUXURIOUS, BUT VERY COMFORTABLE AND BEAUTIFUL. JACOB DREW THE PLANS FOR IT, AND HE ALSO SET ABOUT BUILDING A HOUSE FOR HIMSELF IN THE NEW SETTLEMENT, WHICH BY COMMON CONSENT WAS CALLED BETH-ISRAEL.

BEFORE WE MOVED INTO OUR NEW HOME, CARI-LA GAVE BIRTH TO A SECOND SON. WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE TO NAME HIM SIMEON, AND THE PARENTS AGREED.

"THE NEXT WILL BE LEVI," JERUSHA SAID, LAUGHING. THE PARENTS SEEMED TO BE PLEASED TO BE CONSIDERED PART OF ISRAEL. SAR-VEG AGREED TO BE CIRCUMCISED. JERUSHA BECAME VERY FOND OF THE CHILDREN OF THE SLAVES, AND TREATED THEM AS IF THEY WERE HER OWN GRANDCHILDREN.

ANOTHER WHO BUILT IN THE NEW SETTLEMENT WAS ISAIAH. SOON AFTER WE HAD GOT SETTLED IN THE NEW HOME HE CAME TO SHOW ME ANOTHER POEM HE HAD WRITTEN. HE CALLED IT THE SUFFERING SERVANT. "IT IS ANOTHER ONE ABOUT THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH," HE SAID.

I LOOKED AT THE POEM. IT CONSISTED OF FIVE STROPHES.

"IN THE FIRST STROPHE, YAHWEH IS SPEAKING," ISAIAH EXPLAINED. "THEN IN THE NEXT IT IS THE NATIONS SPEAKING, MARVELING AT THE SERVANT. IN THE THIRD AND FOURTH, IT IS ISRAEL SPEAKING, AND IN THE LAST, IT IS YAHWEH SPEAKING AGAIN."

I READ IT THROUGH, PROFOUNDLY IMPRESSED, NOTING HOW THE EMPHASIS FELL WITH TERRIFIC EFFECT ON THE PRONOUNS:

"BEHOLD, MY SERVANT CAUSES CONSTERNATION,

THE BURDEN LAID ON HIM EXCEEDINGLY GREAT.

AS MANY WERE ASTONISHED AT HIM,

HIS APPEARANCE SO MARKED, BEYOND HUMAN SEMBLANCE,

HIS FORM MORE THAN ANY HUMAN BEING,

SO SHALL HE CAUSE MANY NATIONS TO LEAP, KINGS TO STAND IN AWE,

FOR WHAT HAS NEVER BEEN TOLD THEM THEY SHALL SEE,

AND WHAT THEY HAVE NEVER HEARD THEY SHALL UNDERSTAND.

"WHO WOULD BELIEVE OUR REPORT?

AND THE STRENGTH OF YAHWEH, TO WHOM REVEALED?

FOR HE GREW UP BEFORE HIM LIKE A SAPLING,

LIKE A PLANT SPRINGING OUT OF DRY GROUND.

NO BEAUTY HAD HE, NOTHING TO ADMIRE,

NO GRACE TO MAKE US DESIRE HIM.

HE WAS DESPISED, REJECTED BY MEN,

A MAN OF SUFFERINGS, COVERED WITH DISHONOR,

A MAN FROM WHOM WE TURNED AWAY IN HORROR,

A MAN DESPISED, WE THOUGHT NOTHING OF HIM.

"YET OURS WERE THE SUFFERINGS HE DURE,
 OURS THE PAINS HE ENDURED.
 WE THOUGHT OF HIM AS SOMEONE PUNISHED,
 SMITTEN BY GOD, AND AFFLICTED.
 BUT HE WAS PIERCED THROUGH FOR OUR TRANSGRESSIONS,
 HE WAS CRUSHED FOR OUR INIQUITIES,
 UPON HIM WAS THE PUNISHMENT THAT MADE US WHOLE,
 AND THROUGH HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED.
 ALL WE LIKE SHEEP HAVE GONE ASTRAY,
 WE HAVE TURNED EVERY ONE TO HIS OWN WAY,
 AND YAHWEH HAS LAID ON HIM THE INIQUITY OF US ALL.

"HE WAS OPPRESSED, AFFLICTED, YET HE DORE IT HUMBLY;
 NEVER OPENING HIS MOUTH.
 LIKE A LAMB LED TO THE SLAUGHTER,
 A SHEEP DUMB BEFORE ITS SHEPHERDS,
 NEVER OPENING HIS MOUTH.
 BY OPPRESSION AND JUDGMENT HE WAS TAKEN,
 WHO CARED WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?
 HE WAS CUT OFF, STRUCK DOWN IN DEATH,
 STRICKEN FOR THE TRANSGRESSION OF HIS PEOPLE.
 THEY GAVE HIM A GRAVE WITH THE WICKED,
 A TOMB WITH THE RICH OPPRESSOR,
 THOUGH HE HAD DONE NO VIOLENCE,
 NOR WAS FALSEHOOD FOUND IN HIS MOUTH.
 YET IT PLEASED YAHWEH TO BRUISE HIM,
 HE HAS PUT HIM TO GRIEF.

"WHEN HE MAKES HIMSELF AN OFFERING FOR SIN
 HE SHALL SEE HIS OFFSPRING, PROLONG HIS LIFE,
 AND THE PURPOSE OF YAHWEH SHALL BE ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH HIM.
 HE SHALL SEE THE FRUIT OF HIS SUFFERINGS AND BE SATISFIED.
 BY HIS KNOWLEDGE SHALL MY SERVANT, THE RIGHTEOUS ONE,
 CAUSE MANY TO BE ACCOUNTED RIGHTEOUS ONES,
 HE HIMSELF WILL BEAR THEIR INIQUITIES.
 THEREFORE I SHALL GIVE HIM A PLACE WITH THE GREAT,
 LIKE THE STRONG HE SHALL HAVE HIS REWARD.
 BECAUSE HE POUED OUT HIS SOUL TO DEATH,
 AND WAS NUMBERED WITH THE TRANSGRESSORS.
 HE DORE THE SINS OF MANY,
 MAKING INTERCESSION FOR THE SINFUL PEOPLE."

"THAT IS A TRULY GREAT PLEA, ISAIAH," I SAID. "AND YET IT LEAVES ME
 PUZZLED. WHO IS THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH?"

"ISRAEL, OF COURSE," HE SAID.

"BUT IT SEEMS HARDLY ACCURATE TO SAY OF ISRAEL THAT HE 'OPENED NOT HIS
 MOUTH'. FOR MY OBSERVATION HAS BEEN THAT ISRAEL HAS NEVER CEASED TO OPEN
 HIS MOUTH WITH OUTCRY AND CLAMOR."

"WELL," HE SAID, "IT IS POETRY, AFTER ALL....."

"AND IN THE THIRD AND FOURTH STROPHES IT IS ISRAEL SPEAKING, 'WE', 'OUR', 'US', SPEAKING ABOUT THE SERVANT, REFERRED TO AS 'HE', 'HIM'. IF WE ARE ISRAEL, WHO IS HE?"

ISAIAH STOOD, NONPLUSSED. "I'M NOT SURE," HE SAID AT LAST.

"IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT A PERSON, AN INDIVIDUAL, WHO SUFFERS ON BEHALF OF HIS PEOPLE."

HE WAS SILENT FOR A WHILE. "YES, I GUESS I WAS," HE SAID.

"THEN WHO WAS THAT INDIVIDUAL? WAS IT SOMEONE WHO HAS ALREADY LIVED, OR SOMEONE YET TO APPEAR? JEREMIAH SUFFERED, BUT IT DOES NOT SEEM TO FIT HIM. JEREMIAH SUFFERED, BUT NOT WITHOUT OPENING HIS MOUTH, GOD KNOWS WHO THEN IS, OR WAS, OR US TO BE THIS SUFFERING SERVANT?"

"I DON'T KNOW," HE SAID.

"BUT WHEN YOU WERE WRITING, SURELY YOU HAD SOMEBODY IN MIND. WHO WAS IT?"

"I HAD, AND I HADN'T. IT JUST CAME TO ME LIKE THAT, AND I WROTE IT DOWN."

"HEAVENLY VOICES?"

"THERE WASN'T ANYTHING I HEARD, WITH MY EARS." HE TOUCHED HIS EARS, AS IF CALLING THEM TO WITNESS. "AS I THOUGHT ABOUT IT, IT CAME TO ME. ONE WORD SEEMED TO CALL FOR ANOTHER, AND I WROTE IT DOWN. IT ALL MAKES SENSE, BUT I AM STILL NOT SURE WHAT IT MEANS?"

"IT IS A GREAT POEM," I SAID. "IT MUST BE A REVELATION, LIKE SOME THAT CAME TO JEREMIAH, AND THE OTHER ISAIAH, AND THE PROPHETS LONG AGO — EVEN TO ZEKIEL, IN OUR OWN TIME. SAVE IT, MAYBE SOME DAY IT WILL HAVE MORE MEANING FOR US — OR FOR OTHER PEOPLE, AFTER WE ARE DEAD AND GONE."

"YES, PERHAPS IT WILL," HE SAID.

NERGAL-SHAREZER

ANOTHER ROYAL FUNERAL. IT HAD BEEN ONLY A LITTLE OVER TWO YEARS SINCE HE HAD MARCHED THROUGH THE STREETS AFTER THE DEATH OF NEBUCHADREZZAR, AND HERE HE WENT AGAIN. EVIL-MAROUK WAS DEAD.

HIS DEATH CAME WITHOUT WARNING. AS HE WAS GOING TO BREAKFAST ON A CALM MORNING IN EARLY AUTUMN, HE SUDDENLY COLLAPSED. PHYSICIANS WERE SUMMONED, BUT THERE WAS NOTHING THEY COULD DO. HE WAS DEAD. IT MUST HAVE BEEN HIS HEART, THEY SAID, THOUGH HE HAD GIVEN NO SIGN OF PAIN, OR SHORTNESS OF BREATH. SOME PEOPLE WHISPERED OF POISON, BUT THAT SEEMED HARDLY POSSIBLE, AS HE HAD TAKEN NO FOOD OR DRINK FOR SEVERAL HOURS. HE WAS ONLY FIFTY-TWO.

NERGAL-SHAREZER WAS THE DESIGNATED SUCCESSOR, BUT HE WAS FAR AWAY, WITH THE ARMY, IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF HARAN. RIDERS WERE DISPATCHED IMMEDIATELY TO SUMMON HIM, BUT IN THE MEANTIME LIFE MUST GO ON. NITOCRIS, THE QUEEN — HOWEVER MANY WIVES A KING MIGHT HAVE, ONLY ONE WAS ACKNOWLEDGED AS THE QUEEN — TOOK THINGS INTO HER OWN HANDS. SHE DECLARED HERSELF REGENT UNTIL THE KING SHOULD ARRIVE, AND BEGAN GIVING ORDERS, WHICH NOBODY DARED DISOBEY.

I REMEMBERED THE TIME, ABOUT TWENTY YEARS BEFORE, WHEN NITOCRIS HAD BEEN LIKE A MEMBER OF OUR FAMILY THROUGH THAT BITTER WINTER IN BIRMINA NEAR MOUNT KARAT. I HAD SEEN HER A FEW TIMES SINCE THEN, BUT IF SHE HAD SEEN ME SHE HAD TAKEN NO NOTICE. PERHAPS SHE DID NOT LIKE TO THINK OF THE TIME WHEN SHE HAD BEEN SUBJECT TO DISCIPLINE. NOW SHE APPEARED BOLDLY IN PUBLIC, GIVING ORDERS AS IF SHE WERE THE SUPREME AND ONLY AUTHORITY.

SO WE MARCHED IN THE FUNERAL PROCESSION, THE HIGH PRIEST OF MARDUK BEING IN THE PLACE OF GOREBEY HIN. ALL THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATED, AND ALL THE OTHER INSTITUTIONS WERE REPRESENTED. IT WAS A GRAND AFFAIR. I WAS TRULY SORROWFUL; EVIL-MARDUK HAD BEEN A GOOD, AND CONSIDERATE KING, AND BESIDES HE HAD BEEN A GOOD FRIEND TO ME. WHAT NERGAL-SHAREZER MIGHT BE LIKE AS A KING I COULD ONLY GUESS. AS A BOY HE HAD BEEN HEADSTRONG AND HARD TO CONTROL, THOUGH I HAD SOME HAPPY MEMORIES OF THE EXPEDITION TO ARMINA. I HAD SEEN LITTLE OF HIM SINCE.

EVIL-MARDUK HAD BEEN BURIED ALMOST A MONTH BEFORE THE CORONATION OF THE NEW KING. IT WAS A SPECTACULAR AFFAIR. IN MID AUTUMN, THE WEATHER WAS FAVORABLE, PEOPLE WERE IN A FESTIVE MOOD, FOOD AND WINE WERE ABUNDANT, FREELY DISTRIBUTED AS BARGESSES OF THE KING.

NERGAL-SHAREZER WAS IN HIS EARLY THIRTIES, AND HE CERTAINLY LOOKED LIKE A KING IN HIS MAGNIFICENT ROBES. THE YOUNG PRINCE NADU NAI'DO RODE IN THE CHARIOT WITH HIS FATHER, AND PROCLAMATION WAS MADE THAT HE WAS THE KING'S DESIGNATED SUCCESSOR. NO DOUBT THE KING HAD MANY SONS BY LESSER WIVES, BUT NADU NAI'DO WAS THE ONLY SON OF NITOCRIS, THE QUEEN. HE WAS THIRTEEN, NOTHER SLIGHT IN BUILD, FAIR HAired, LIKE HIS MOTHER.

BUT NITOCRIS OUTSHONE THEM ALL. HER BEAUTY WAS EXTRAORDINARY, HER ROBES BEYOND ALL ATTEMPTS AT DESCRIPTION. AT THE CORONATION SHE WAS SEATED BESIDE THE KING, ON A THRONE LITTLE INFERIOR TO HIS OWN. WHEN THE ROYAL CROWN HAD BEEN PLACED ON THE KING'S HEAD, ANOTHER CROWN WAS PLACED ON THE HEAD OF THE QUEEN; AND PUBLIC PROCLAMATION WAS MADE THAT IN ANY ABSENCE OF THE KING SHE WOULD BE QUEEN REGENT, WITH FULL AUTHORITY.

SHEALTIEL HAD BY THIS TIME ATTAINED SUFFICIENT RANK IN THE ARMY THAT HE KNEW SOMETHING OF WHAT WAS GOING ON IN HIGH PLACES. HIS UNIT WAS IN THE CAPITAL FOR THE CORONATION, AND HE MADE US A SHORT VISIT WHILE THERE, AND TALKED FREELY WITHIN THE FAMILY CIRCLE.

"DURING THE OLD KING'S LAST YEARS THINGS REALLY GOT IN A BAD WAY," HE SAID. "THE KING WAS SO MUCH OBSESSED WITH THE GARDEN HE WAS BUILDING THAT ALL OTHER PUBLIC WORKS WERE FORGOTTEN. ALL THE MONEY WENT INTO THAT UNNECESSARY EXTRAVAGANCE. AND THE ARMY ESPECIALLY WAS IN A DEPLORABLE STATE. WHEN EVIL-MARDUK BECAME KING, AND WHEN NERGAL-SHAREZER WAS APPOINTED COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF THE FIRST THING TO DO WAS REORGANIZE THE ARMY AND GET NEW EQUIPMENT. THERE WAS A LOT TO BE DONE, AND NOW WITH THE KING'S DEATH IT IS HARDLY BEGUN. RUMORS ARE THAT THE NEW KING IS GOING TO LEAVE THE QUEEN IN CHARGE HERE, WHILE HE DEVOTES ALL HIS TIME AND ENERGY TO PUTTING THE ARMY IN SHAPE TO DEFEND OUR COUNTRY."

"YOU DON'T THINK HE WILL UNDERTAKE ANY NEW CONQUESTS?" BILSHAN ASKED.

"PEOPLE WHO PROFESS TO KNOW SAY THAT FOR THE TIME BEING WE SHALL DO WELL TO HOLD WHAT WE HAVE. THE MEDES ARE THREATENING, AND THE PERSIANS ARE GROWING IN POWER. THE OLD KING THEISPES IS NEAR DEATH. WHEN HE DIES CYRUS WILL TAKE OVER, AND THEN ANYTHING MAY HAPPEN."

I REMEMBERED THE CONVERSATIONS I HAD HAD WITH CYRUS. HE SEEMED A REASONABLE MAN IN MANY WAYS, BUT WAS CERTAINLY A BUNDLE OF ENERGY. AND IF HE SHOULD MANAGE TO GET THE PERSIANS AND MEDES WORKING TOGETHER, WE WOULD FIND OURSELVES FACING A SERIOUS THREAT.

AT ANY RATE, NOT LONG AFTER THE CORONATION THE KING LEFT THE CAPITAL AND WENT AWAY OFF UP NORTH SOMEWHERE, TO CONTINUE HIS WORK OF REVITALIZING THE ARMY. THE QUEEN WAS LEFT IN CHARGE. SHE HAD NEVER BEEN THE SORT OF QUEEN TO REMAIN HIDDEN AWAY IN THE HAREM, AND NOW SHE SAT ON THE THRONE IN THE JUDGMENT HALL, AND HER DECISIONS WERE FINAL. THE SPECIAL TAX THAT HAD BEEN LEVIED FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GARDENS WAS CONTINUED, BEING DESIGNATED FOR FORTIFICATIONS FOR THE CAPITAL AND OTHER CITIES; AND A NEW TAX WAS IMPOSED, AND SPECIAL POLICE APPOINTED TO SEE THAT IT WAS COLLECTED. PEOPLE GROANED, BUT THEY PAID, ESPECIALLY AFTER A FEW IMPORTANT PEOPLE WERE DEALT WITH SEVERELY FOR ATTEMPTING TO EVADE THE TAX.

IT WAS ABOUT A YEAR LATER THAT THE NEWS CAME THAT THE OLD KING THEISPES WAS DEAD. AND IT WAS NOT LONG UNTIL WE LEARNED THAT CYRUS HAD DEFEATED THE MEDES, AND MADE HIMSELF SUPREME RULER OF THE MEDES AND PERSIANS. IT BEGAN TO LOOK LIKE THE THING THAT WE HAD DREADED MIGHT COME TO PASS.

IT WAS TWO YEARS AFTER HIS GRANDFATHER'S DEATH THAT NABU NATHID ENROLLED AT THE UNIVERSITY. HE WAS ONLY FIFTEEN, BUT SOON REVEALED HIMSELF AS A BRILLIANT STUDENT. I HAD HIM IN SOME OF MY CLASSES, AND BECAME QUITE FOND OF HIM. AT THE SAME TIME I HAD GRAVE DOUBTS AS TO HIS FITNESS FOR RULING AN EMPIRE. HIS GIFTS WERE CERTAINLY NOT FOR WAR, NOR FOR ADMINISTRATION, AS I SAW THEM. I PRAYED THAT NERGAL-SHAREZER MIGHT LIVE LONG.

SHORTLY AFTER MY BIRTHDAY FIFTY-FIVE -- IT SEEMED INCREDIBLE TO ME THAT I COULD HAVE GROWN SO OLD -- ANNOUNCEMENT WAS MADE OF AN IMPENDING ROYAL WEDDING. NABU NATHID WAS MARRYING THE DAUGHTER OF CROESUS, KING OF LYDIA. IT WAS A POLITICAL MARRIAGE, ARRANGED BY HIS FATHER. NABU NATHID WAS ONLY SEVENTEEN, AND IN NO HURRY TO TAKE A WIFE. HE STILL HAD ONE MORE YEAR TO FINISH HIS COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY. HE TALKED TO ME ABOUT IT.

"I HAVEN'T SEEN THE GIRL," HE SAID, "BUT THEY TELL ME SHE IS BEAUTIFUL, AND HER FATHER IS FABULOUSLY RICH. I THINK FATHER IS CONCERNED TO KEEP LYDIA IN THE EMPIRE. ME, I'M NOT VERY EMPIRE MINDED. I COULDN'T CARE LESS WHETHER LYDIA, AND SYRIA, AND PHOENICIA, AND ALL THOSE PLACES ARE IN THE EMPIRE OR NOT. BUT FATHER THINKS IT IS IMPORTANT, AND I GUESS IT WILL BE NICE TO BE MARRIED. ANYWAY, THAT'S THE WAY IT IS SET UP, AND I'LL GO THROUGH WITH IT."

"BUT DO YOU STILL PLAN TO FINISH YOUR COURSE HERE?"

"ABSOLUTELY," HE SAID. "TO ME, MY STUDIES ARE MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE EMPIRE. SO DON'T FLATTER YOURSELF THAT YOU ARE GETTING RID OF ME."

"FEAR FROM IT," I SAID. "YOU ARE TOO GOOD A STUDENT TO DROP OUT NOW."

ANYWAY, THE WEDDING CAME OFF, AS PLANNED. BUT IN THE FALL, WHEN SCHOOL OPENED, NABU NATHID WAS BACK IN CLASS, WORKING HARDER THAN EVER. HISTORY WAS HIS MAJOR SUBJECT, BUT HE HAD BEEN TAKING HEBREW AND GREEK UNDER ME, AND I HAD GROWN INCREASINGLY FOND OF HIM. I NEVER SAW THE BRIDE AFTER THE WEDDING, BUT IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE HE CONFIDED TO ME THAT HIS WIFE WAS PREGNANT.

AND THEN TRAGEDY STRUCK. THE FORCES OF CYRUS WERE EXPANDING THEIR BASE, HAD OCCUPIED ALL THE COAST OF THE EUXINE SEA, AND WERE THREATENING LYDIA. NERGAL-SHAREZER WENT WITH HIS ARMY TO ATTACK THEM. THE BATTLE WAS INDECISIVE, BUT IN THE FIGHTING THE KING RECEIVED A WOUND. HE DISMISSED IT AS A MERE SCRATCH, BUT THE WOUND BECAME INFECTED, AND IN A FEW DAYS HE WAS DEAD. ALL THE COUNTRY WAS IN MOURNING. HIS BODY WAS EMBALMED AND BROUGHT BACK TO BABYLON, AND SO WE HAD ANOTHER ROYAL FUNERAL, THE THIRD IN LESS THAN SEVEN YEARS.

AND AFTER THE FUNERAL THERE HAD TO BE THE CORONATION, AND STILL MORE CEREMONIES AND PROCESSIONS. THERE WAS SOME DISCUSSION AS TO WHETHER OR NOT THE PRINCE SHOULD BE CROWNED, STILL NOT EIGHTEEN. BUT THE QUEEN INSISTED ON IT, AND AS USUAL SHE HAD HER WAY. NABU NA'ID WAS NOT ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT BEING KING, AND GLADLY AGREED TO LET HIS MOTHER GO ON ADMINISTERING THE GOVERNMENT, AS SHE HAD BEEN DOING IN THE KING'S ABSENCE. AND SO HE WAS CROWNED, AND CONTINUED HIS STUDIES.

NABU NA'ID

NABU NA'ID DECIDED TO GO ON FOR TWO YEARS OF GRADUATE STUDY. HE WAS A BRILLIANT STUDENT, AND HIS MARKS WERE OF THE HIGHEST, SO THAT IN COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS HE WOULD SURELY HAVE WON THE APPOINTMENT, EVEN IF HE HAD NOT BEEN KING, AND THEREFORE ABLE TO APPOINT WHOM HE PLEASED. HE TOLD ME OF HIS DECISION.

"THAT WILL BE SOMETHING UNUSUAL," I OBSERVED, "A KING CONCERNED WITH SCHOLARSHIP."

"NOT COMPLETELY WITHOUT PRECEDENT," HE SAID. "THINK OF ASSHUR-SANI-APLU, AND ALL THE LIGARIES HE ESTABLISHED. HE WAS MY ANCESTOR, AFTER ALL -- MY GRANDMOTHER'S GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER. MAYBE I'M TAKING AFTER HIM," HE SAID, LAUGHING.

"SCHOLARSHIP IS FINE, AND I'M ALL FOR IT," I SAID. "BUT WHAT ABOUT YOUR DUTIES AS HEAD OF THE STATE?"

"LET MOTHER RUN THE STATE," HE SAID. "SHE LIKES TO BE QUEEN REGENT, AND GIVE ORDERS, AND HAVE EVERYBODY BOW DOWN BEFORE HER. ALL THAT STUFF IS NONSENSE TO ME."

"BUT WHAT ABOUT THE EMPIRE? YOU MUST KNOW THAT WE ARE IN A CRITICAL TIME, THE MEDES AND PERSIANS ARE THREATENING, YOU MAY EVEN LOSE THE KINGDOM."

"SO WHAT? MY STUDY OF HISTORY HAS SHOWN ME THAT KINGDOMS RISE AND FALL, KINGS COME AND GO, AND THE WORLD IS LITTLE CHANGED BY IT ALL. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE WHETHER THIS COUNTRY IS GOVERNED BY THE AKKADIANS OR THE PERSIANS OR SOME OTHER GROUP. IT'S THE PEOPLE THAT TILL THE SOIL, AND TEND THE STOCK, THAT ARE REALLY THE NATION. WHATEVER HAPPENS, I'M GOING ON WITH MY STUDIES."

"WELL, I SUPPOSE THAT IN A SENSE YOU ARE RIGHT," I SAID. "NE, I AM A SORT OF OUTSIDER ANYWAY, AS I'VE TOLD YOU. AND I NEVER GIVE UP HOPE THAT I MIGHT SOME TIME GO BACK TO THE COUNTRY I CAME FROM. NOT BUT WHAT I HAVE DONE VERY HERE, AND ALL, BUT....."

"THAT'S THE WAY MY WIFE TALKS," HE SAID. "SHE HATES THIS COUNTRY LIKE POISON. BUT THERE IS NOTHING SHE CAN DO ABOUT IT."

"WHEN IS THE BABY DUE?"

"ABOUT TWO MOONS, MY MOTHER SAYS. 'SHE NEVER HAD BUT ONE CHILD, BUT SHE KNOWS ALL ABOUT BABIES. SHE KNOWS ALL ABOUT EVERYTHING. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IT, ASK HER." HE TURNED AWAY, LAUGHING.

HE HAD ALSO TOLD ME THAT HIS MOTHER PREDICTED UNEQUIVOCALLY THAT THE BABY WOULD BE A BOY. AND WHETHER BY KNOWLEDGE OR GUESSWORK, SHE WAS RIGHT IN BOTH PREDICTIONS. THE BABY WAS A BOY. THEY HELD A GREAT FEAST, AND NAMED HIM DELSHAZZAR.

"NOW I'VE PRODUCED AN HEIR TO THE THRONE," NADU NA'ID SAID. "NOW I'VE DISCHARGED MY RESPONSIBILITY TO THE STATE, AND FROM HERE ON I'M GOING TO DO AS I PLEASE. AND I'D LIKE TO SEE SOMEBODY TRY TO STOP ME."

NOBODY TRIED TO STOP HIM. HE FINISHED THE COURSE. THE QUEEN HAD SOME GENERALS THAT SHE TRUSTED, AND AMONG THEM THEY TRIED TO BUILD UP THE ARMY, AND ERECT FORTS IN CERTAIN STRATEGIC PLACES, FAR OUT ON THE FRONTIER. TAXES WERE INCREASED STILL MORE, THE PEOPLE GRIEVED AND COMPLAINED. AND ALL THE REPORTS WE HAD FROM THE MEDES AND PERSIANS WERE OF CITIES CONQUERED, EXPANDING THEIR COUNTRY. THEY STARTED BUILDING A NEW CAPITAL AT SUSA, AND IT WAS SAID THAT WHEN COMPLETED IT WOULD RIVAL BABYLON.

ALL THIS TIME I HAD HEARD LITTLE FROM YESHUA. SO FAR AS I KNEW HE WAS STILL IN SPARTA. ON MY BIRTHDAY SIXTY WE HAD A CELEBRATION, WITH MAHLAM AND JOAD AND THEIR SPOUSES, AND FOURTEEN GRANDCHILDREN -- THEY HAD SEVEN EACH. MANY FRIENDS WERE PRESENT ALSO.

"NOW IF ONLY YESHUA COULD BE HERE," I SAID, "THIS WOULD REALLY BE A CELEBRATION. THE LAST I HEARD HE HAD SIX CHILDREN, THAT WOULD MAKE TWENTY GRANDCHILDREN ALL TOGETHER."

DANIEL WAS ONE OF THE GUESTS, AND HIS WIFE, AND THEIR GRANDSON ZERUBABEL, WHO WAS A FIRST YEAR STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY. DANIEL WAS OVER SEVENTY, BUT STILL LOOKED YOUNG AND VIGOROUS.

ISAIAH WAS THERE ALSO. HE BROUGHT ONE OF HIS POEMS, AND READ IT AT THE FEAST. "THIS WAS NOT WRITTEN ABOUT YOU," HE SAID, ADDRESSING ME. "IT WAS REALLY WRITTEN ABOUT OUR PEOPLE, AND THE HOPE THAT OUR NATION MAY BE RESTORED. BUT IT SEEMS APPROPRIATE FOR THIS OCCASION."

"AND YOU STILL FEEL CONFIDENT THAT WE SHALL BE RESTORED?" I ASKED. "I MEAN, THAT WE SHALL GO BACK AND REBUILD JERUSALEM?"

"I AM SURE OF IT," HE SAID. "I AM NOT SURE HOW IT WILL BE BROUGHT TO PASS, BUT I AM TOTALLY CONFIDENT THAT IT WILL COME. LISTEN TO THIS:

"BUT ZION SAID, 'YAHWEH HAS FORSAKEN ME,
MY LORD HAS FORGOTTEN ME.'
'CAN A WOMAN FORGET HER SUCKING CHILD, (YAHWEH SAYS)
CAN SHE CEASE TO CARE FOR THE SON OF HER WOMB?
EVEN IF SHE COULD FORGET, I WILL NOT FORGET YOU.
BEHOLD, I HAVE ENGRAVED YOU ON THE PALM OF MY HAND;
YOUR WALLS ARE ALWAYS BEFORE ME.
YOUR BUILDERS OUTSTRIP YOUR DESTROYERS,
AND THOSE WHO HAVE DESTROYED HAVE GONE FROM YOU.
LIFT UP YOUR EYES, LOOK AROUND AND SEE,
THEY ARE COMING, THEY ARE COMING TO YOU.
'AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LIVING ONE,
YOU SHALL PUT THEM ON LIKE JEWELRY,
YOU SHALL ATTACH THEM TO YOU, AS A BRIDE PUTS ON HER JEWELS."

"SURELY YOUR AIN AND DESOLATE PLACES,
AND YOUR DEWASTATED LAND --
SURELY NOW I WILL BE TO YOU SHALL BE ITS INHABITANTS,
AND THOSE WHO SWALLINED YOU UP WILL BE FAR REMOVED."

"THE CHILDREN BORN IN THE TIME OF YOUR BEREAVEMENT
WILL SOON BE SAYING IN YOUR EARS,
"THIS PLACE IS TOO NARROW FOR US,
MAKE ROOM FOR US TO DWELL IN."
THEN YOU WILL SAY IN YOUR HEART,
"WHO HAS BORN US THESE?"

"I WAS BEREAVED AND BARREN, EXILED AND PUT AWAY,
BUT WHO HAS BROUGHT UP THESE?
I WAS ABANDONED AND LEFT ALONE;
WHENCE THEN HAVE ALL THESE COME?"

"AH, IF WE COULD ONLY HAVE YESHUA AND HIS FAMILY HERE!" JERUSHA SAID.
"MAYBE THIS TIME NEXT YEAR THEY WILL BE WITH US," I SAID.

AND, GODLY ENOUGH, THEY DID — NOT IN TIME FOR MY BIRTHDAY, BUT ABOUT
MID SUMMER OF THE YEAR I WAS SIXTY-ONE, THE WHOLE TROOP SUDDENLY APPEARED,
YESHUA AND HIS WIFE DEBORAH, AND EIGHT CHILDREN, FIVE BOYS AND THREE GIRLS,
THE ELDEST ALMOST TWENTY YEARS OLD. WE SUMMONED THE OTHER CHILDREN, AND
HAD ANOTHER GATHERING. I HAD MADE A COPY OF ISAIAH'S POEM, AND I READ IT
ALoud. WHEN I CAME TO THE QUESTION, "WHERE DID ALL THESE CHILDREN COME
FROM?" IT BROUGHT ON AN OUTBURST OF LAUGHTER.

YESHUA HAD MANY THINGS TO TELL. HE HAD NOT BEEN IN SPARTA ALL THIS TIME,
BUT HAD TRAVELED IN MANY PLACES ON SPECIAL MISSIONS FOR OUR EMBASSY, TO
SYRACUSE, TO CARTHAGE, EVEN TO ROME. AND WHEREVER HE HAD GONE, HE HAD AL-
WAYS FOUND AT LEAST A FEW OF OUR PEOPLE. FOLLOWING THE INSTRUCTIONS I HAD
GIVEN HIM, HE HAD ENCOURAGED THEM TO GATHER ON THE SABBATH DAY AND REMIND
THEMSELVES THAT THEY WERE STILL GOD'S PEOPLE. SOME OF THEM HAD COPIES OF
SOME OF THE SACRED BOOKS. THEY STILL KEPT UP THE RITUAL PRAYERS, THOUGH MANY
OF THEM KNEW NOTHING OF THE HEBREW TONGUE EXCEPT FOR THOSE PRAYERS.

HE ALSO TOLD ABOUT THE SPARTANS, THE RIGOROUS TRAINING GIVEN TO THEIR
SOLDIERS, AND OF THE REGIMENTS OF SPARTAN SOLDIERS WHO WERE WILLING TO
SERVE AS MERCENARIES IN OTHER NATIONS. "WHEN I LEFT," HE SAID, "OUR AMBAS-
SADOR IN SPARTS WAS TRYING TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR HIRING SOME OF THESE TO
STRENGTHEN OUR FORCES IN LYDIA. WE ARE EXPECTING AN ALL OUT PERSIAN ATTACK
OVER THERE, AND ALL WE CAN PUT IN WILL HARDLY BE ENOUGH TO STOP IT."

"YOU THINK THE SITUATION IS SERIOUS, THEN?"

"LYDIA IS CRITICAL. IF WE LOSE LYDIA WE ARE CUT OFF FROM ALL OUR CON-
TACTS WITH THE WEST. IN FACT, I THINK IF WE LOSE LYDIA, OUR EMPIRE IS
DOOMED."

"AND WHAT WOULD THAT MEAN FOR US — PEOPLE OF ISRAEL, I MEAN?"

"WHO KNOWS?" YESHUA SAID. "I WORK FOR THIS GOVERNMENT, AND I AM LOYAL
TO THIS NATION AS BETWEEN IT AND ANY OTHER NATION. BUT I'VE BEEN DOING A LOT
OF THINKING. I CONSIDER THAT MY FIRST LOYALTY IS TO YAHWEH, THEN TO OUR
OWN PEOPLE, ISRAEL. AND IN ANY SHAKE-UP OF NATIONS YAHWEH MAY MAKE THINGS
WORK OUT TO THE ADVANTAGE OF OUR PEOPLE — IF HE THINKS WE HAVE BEEN
PUNISHED ENOUGH."

I TOLD HIM ABOUT THE CONTACTS I HAD HAD WITH CYRUS, SEVERAL YEARS BE-
FORE. "HE SEEMED LIKE A REASONABLE MAN," I SAID. "IF HE SHOULD GET CONTROL
OF THINGS WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO WORK OUT SOMETHING WITH HIM."

"DO YOU THINK OUR PEOPLE WOULD BE WILLING TO GO BACK, GIVEN THE CHANCE?"

"THEY WOULD TAKE SOME PERSUADING," I SAID. "WE'VE BEEN HERE ALMOST FIFTY YEARS; THERE ARE FEW ENOUGH LEFT WHO EVER KNEW THE OLD COUNTRY. STILL, MOST OF THEM BELIEVE THAT WE ARE GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE, AND THAT THE LAND IS STILL OUR 'PROMISED LAND', AS IT WAS LONG AGO. IT WAS HARD ENOUGH FOR MOSES, INSPIRED PROPHET THAT HE WAS, TO GET THE PEOPLE TO LEAVE EGYPT AND TRY FOR IT. BUT IF THE OPPORTUNITY COMES IN MY LIFETIME, I WOULD SURELY TRY IT."

I ASKED YESHUA WHAT HIS PLANS WERE. "I'M NOT GOING BACK TO SPARTA," HE SAID. "IN FACT, IF LYDIA FALLS, WE MAY BE PICKING BACK OUR EMBASSIES IN THE WEST. RIGHT NOW, THEY WILL PROBABLY HAVE AN OFFICE JOB FOR ME. I'LL HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE."

YESHUA AND HIS FAMILY WENT WITH US FOR A VISIT TO CHEDAR. MOTHER WAS STILL LIVING, BUT VERY FEEDLE. SHE WAS DELIGHTED TO SEE HER GRANDSON, AND ALL THE GREAT GRANDCHILDREN. EZEKIEL HAD DIED THE YEAR BEFORE. HIS DAUGHTER GAVE ME ALL HIS MANUSCRIPTS. "I THINK YOU ARE IN A BETTER POSITION THAN I TO CARE FOR THEM," SHE SAID.

ELASA HAD BEEN DEAD TWO YEARS. HIS SON SIGVAI, ABOUT YESHUA'S AGE, HAD TAKEN OVER HIS WORK OF COPYING MANUSCRIPTS. HE HAD THREE DAUGHTERS WHO WERE QUITE HELPFUL IN THIS WORK.

AS WE TALKED TOGETHER AN IDEA CAME TO ME. "IT HAS JUST OCCURRED TO ME," I SAID, "THAT WE OUGHT TO HAVE SOME SORT OF ORGANIZATION OF OUR PEOPLE. I WOULD HAVE BEEN IN LINE TO BE HIGH PRIEST IF WE HAD STAYED IN JERUSALEM, BUT A MAN IS NOT SUPPOSED TO HOLD THAT OFFICE AFTER SIXTY YEARS OF AGE. YET THE OPPORTUNITY TO GO BACK SHOULD COME ANY TIME SOON, YESHUA, HERE, IS NEXT IN LINE. HE CANNOT FUNCTION AS A PRIEST HERE, BUT HE SHOULD BE DESIGNATED AS HIGH PRIEST, SO THAT WHEN — I'M NOT SAYING 'IF', I'M SAYING 'WHEN' — WE GO BACK TO OUR OWN LAND, SOMEbody WILL BE AUTHORIZED TO ACT. AND YOU, SIGVAI, SHOULD BE DESIGNATED AS OFFICIAL SCRIBE. YOU SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR PRESERVING OUR SACRED BOOKS, AND I THINK WE SHOULD ADD TO THEM THESE WRITINGS OF EZEKIEL, WHICH WILL NEED SOME EDITING BEFORE MAKING AN OFFICIAL COPY, AND THERE ARE SOME OF THE WRITINGS OF ISAIAH THAT I THINK SHOULD BE ADDED ALSO."

THEY AGREED WITH ME, AND WE CALLED ALL THE ELDERS TOGETHER. THEY WERE ABLE TO SEE THE NEED FOR SOME DEFINITE ORGANIZATION. WE MADE A SOLEMN COMPACT, AND RECORDED OUR ACTION. IN ADDITION, THE ELDERS DECLARED THAT ANY POLITICAL ACTION THAT MIGHT BECOME NECESSARY SHOULD BE DONE BY AN APPOINTED LEADER. SHEALTIEL, THE SON OF JECONIAH, WAS ELECTED UNANIMOUSLY. FURTHERMORE, WE DECIDED THAT AN OFFICE SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED, IN THE CAPITAL. I TOOK IT ON MYSELF TO UNDERWRITE THE EXPENSE OF THIS OFFICE, BUT WE HOPED THAT THE SALE OF COPIES OF THE SACRED BOOKS AND PORTIONS OF THEM WOULD BRING IN ENOUGH TO COVER THE EXPENSE, PERHAPS EVEN SHOW A PROFIT. WE ADOPTED A NAME FOR OUR ORGANIZATION — THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL IN EXILE.

AT THE COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES FOLLOWING MY SIXTY-THIRD BIRTHDAY I WAS SEATED IN THE REVIEWING STAND, WATCHING A MILITARY PARADE. THE GRADUATES WHO WERE TO BE COMMISSIONED AS OFFICERS IN THE ARMY HAD JUST BEEN SWORN IN, AND THIS PARADE WAS PART OF THE CEREMONY.

TWO RETIRED GENERALS WERE SEATED NEAR ME, AND I OVERHEARD THEIR COMMENTS ON THE PERFORMANCE.

"THE ARMY HAS FALLEN INTO A SAD DECLINE," ONE OF THEM REMARKED.

"I'LL SAY IT WAS!" THE OTHER REPLIED. "THOSE FELLOWS KNOW NOTHING OF MILITARY PRECISION. WHAT WOULD 'OLD SHAG' THINK OF THAT PERFORMANCE?" (DOUBTLESS REFERRING TO SOME STRICT DISCIPLINARIAN KNOWN TO THEM IN THEIR YOUTH).

MAYBE OLD SOLDIERS ARE ALWAYS LIKE THAT, I THOUGHT. TO MY UNTRAINED EYE THE PARADE LOOKED PRETTY GOOD, BUT I REMEMBERED STORIES I HAD HEARD OF WHAT THE ARMY HAD BEEN LIKE IN NAUCOLASSAN'S TIME. AND I KNEW THAT EVEN IN MY OWN TIME THE STANDARDS OF CONDUCT HAD GROWN SLACK, AND REPORTS WERE RIFE THAT ARMY OFFICIALS WERE TAKING BRIBES, AND OPENLY ROBBERING THE GOVERNMENT. NO WONDER THEY WERE NEEDING TO EMPLOY SPARTAN MERCENARIES TO DEFEND THEM AGAINST THE HEBES AND PERSIANS.

BUT ONE OF THE OFFICERS BEING COMMISSIONED WAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST TO ME. I COULD SEE HIM FROM WHERE I SAT. HE WAS TALLER THAN MOST OF HIS FELLOWS, AND I KNEW THAT HE WAS OUTSTANDING IN MANY WAYS. I HEARD HIS NAME READ OUT — ZERUBBABEL, SON OF SHEALTIEL, FIRST RANK IN HIS CLASS. I WAS PROUD OF HIM, BECAUSE I HAD BEEN HIS TEACHER, AND BECAUSE HE WAS THE SON OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID (AFTER HIS FATHER) ON WHOM WE ISRAELITES WERE PINNING OUR HOPES. I WAS PROUD FOR ANOTHER REASON — AFTER THE COMMISSIONING HE WAS TO BE MARRIED TO MY GRANDDAUGHTER.

NOT MANY DAYS AFTER THIS CEREMONY I RECEIVED A SUMMONS TO APPEAR BEFORE THE KING. I WONDERED WHAT MIGHT BE UP, BUT PUT ON MY BEST ROBE AND WENT. NADU NATHO WAS SEATED ON THE THRONE IN THE APPROVED MANNER, WITH SCEPTER IN HAND. ANOTHER THRONE HAD BEEN PLACED ON HIS RIGHT, AND THE QUEEN MOTHER, NITOCRIS, WAS SEATED ON THAT ONE. I KNELT RESPECTFULLY BEFORE THEM, BUT THE KING MADE ME STAND.

I HAD OFTEN SEEN THE QUEEN ON PUBLIC OCCASIONS, BUT HAD NEVER BEEN SO NEAR HER — NEVER SINCE THOSE FAR-DISTANT DAYS — THIRTY-FIVE YEARS, IT MUST BE — WHEN SHE WAS A PUPIL IN MY HOME, FAR AWAY IN ARMINA, WHEN SHE WAS ABOUT TEN YEARS OLD. NOW SHE LOOKED EVERY INCH A QUEEN.

THE KING SPOKE. "I HAVE SENT FOR YOU, REVERED PROFESSOR," HE SAID, AS COUNSELOR AND FRIEND, TO OFFER YOU THE OPTION OF RETIREMENT ON FULL SALARY IF YOU WISH IT; IT MAY BE THAT THE OFFER WILL NOT BE MADE AGAIN."

I WONDERED WHAT WAS COMING, BUT ANSWERED, "IF YOUR MAJESTY DESIRE MY RESIGNATION I AM READY TO OFFER IT UNCONDITIONALLY; BUT MY PREFERENCE WOULD BE TO CONTINUE TEACHING AS LONG AS MY HEALTH AND STRENGTH PERMIT."

"SO BE IT, THEN," HE SAID. "THE REASON FOR MAKING THE OFFER IS THAT I WILL SOON CEASE TO GOVERN AS KING."

"SURELY YOU ARE NOT ABDICATING?" I SAID.

"NOT EXACTLY. THERE WILL BE A PUBLIC CEREMONY MAKING THE ANNOUNCEMENT. BUT I HAVE RESOLVED TO LEAVE THE OFFICE, AND DO WHAT I WANT TO DO. I AM NAMING MY MOTHER AS REGENT. IT MAY BE THAT SOME DAY I WILL WANT TO RESUME THE OFFICE, BUT I DOUBT IT."

I STILL THOUGHT OF NADU NATHID AS A PUPIL, AND MADE BOLD TO ASK ABOUT HIS PLANS.

"I AM GOING TO DO ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH," HE SAID. "YOU KNOW THAT IN OUR COUNTRY THERE ARE ANY NUMBER OF ANCIENT TEMPLE SITES FALLING INTO RUINS, WHERE IRREPLACEABLE HISTORICAL MATERIAL WILL BE UTTERLY LOST UNLESS SOMEBODY ACTS TO SAVE IT. THIS IS WHAT I AM INTERESTED IN, AND I AM GLAD TO LAY ASIDE THE OFFICE OF KING, AND DO WHAT I REALLY WANT TO DO."

WE CONVERSED FOR A WHILE. HE TOLD ME OF SOME OF THE PLACES WHERE HE WOULD BE WORKING, OF THE NUMBER OF MEN HE PLANNED TO EMPLOY, OF THE AMOUNT THAT HE WAS APPROPRIATING FROM THE PUBLIC TREASURY, WHILE HE STILL HAD THE AUTHORITY TO DO SO, FOR THE SUPPORT OF THE WORK. I WAS THRILLED AT THE PROSPECT. IT SEEMED A STRANGE DECISION TO MAKE, BUT I ALMOST ENVIED HIM.

ALL THIS TIME THE QUEEN SAT IN SILENCE. AS I TOOK MY LEAVE, I VENTURED TO ADDRESS HER, SAYING, "I HAVE SOME FOND MEMORIES OF YOUR MAJESTY IN CHILDHOOD." THE QUEEN MADE NO REPLY, BUT SEEMED TO SIT UP A LITTLE STRAIGHTER. NADU NATHID LAUGHED. LONG AGO I HAD TOLD HIM OF THE SPANKING HIS MOTHER HAD RECEIVED IN THOSE DAYS.

SO NADU NATHID SET OUT ON HIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION. HE TOLD ME THAT HIS FIRST OBJECTIVE WAS THE RUINS OF AN ANCIENT TEMPLE NEAR URUCH. NOTORIOUSLY THE QUEEN TOOK OVER THE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALLY. SHE HAD BEEN GOVERNING UNOFFICIALLY FOR SOME TIME. TAXES WERE INCREASED AGAIN. THE QUEEN ANNOUNCED PLANS FOR VASTLY INCREASED FORTIFICATIONS FOR THE CAPITAL CITY.

THE QUEEN ALSO TOOK CHARGE OF THE LITTLE PRINCE BELSHAZZAR, NOW SEVEN YEARS OLD. HIS MOTHER HAD DIED — OF A BROKEN HEART, SOME SAID. SHE HAD NEVER BEEN HAPPY IN DAR-ILU. THE BOY WAS SPOILED rotten. THE QUEEN APPOINTED A TUTOR FOR HIM, THE FIRST OF MANY TUTORS WHO WERE UNABLE TO CONTROL THE CHILD, OR TO SATISFY THE QUEEN.

TWO YEARS WENT BY. NADU NATHID MUST HAVE BEEN HAPPY IN HIS ARCHAEOLOGY, AT LEAST HE NEVER APPEARED IN THE CAPITAL. BUT ALSO DID COME IN THAT THE GREAT BATTLE FOR SARDIS, CAPITAL OF LYDIA, WAS IN PROGRESS. THE SPARTAN MERCENARIES HAD INDEED COME, AND PHOENICIA HAD SENT A FLEET OF SHIPS, WITH THOUSANDS OF SOLDIERS. BUT JUST WHEN THEY WERE READY TO DISSEMBARK AT SMYRNA A VIOLENT STORM MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE; AND BEFORE THEY COULD EFFECT A LANDING THE CITY OF SARDIS HAD FALLEN. THE SHIPS RETURNED TO TYRE.

THE FALL OF SARDIS WAS A REAL DISASTER. THE AKKADIAN ARMY FELL BACK ON HARAN, TO FORM A LINE OF DEFENSE. BUT ALL OF LYDIA, WITH ITS VAST RESOURCES, FELL INTO THE HANDS OF THE PERSIANS. IT WOULD TAKE SOME TIME FOR CYRUS TO CONSOLIDATE HIS GAINS, BUT WITH LYDIA LOST, SYRIA AND PHOENICIA COULD NO LONGER BE HELD. THE MIGHTY EMPIRE OF SUMER AND AKKAD WAS CRUMBLING.

WORK ON THE NEW FORTIFICATIONS WENT ON FURIOUSLY, WITH VAST NUMBERS OF MEN EMPLOYED. THEY WERE GOING TO BE THE MIGHTIEST THAT THE WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN. HER NOBLES TRIED TO TELL THE QUEEN THAT IF THE EMPIRE WERE LOST IT WOULD BE FUTILE TO TRY TO DEFEND THE CAPITAL. BUT SHE WOULD NOT LISTEN. "ON WITH THE WORK!" SHE SAID. "DAR-ILU WILL NEVER BE TAKEN."

THE NEW WALLS WERE RISING NOT FAR FROM OUR VILLA. OUR GARDENS WERE BEING TRAMPLED BY THE WORKMEN. OUR HOME WOULD NEVER AGAIN BE THE PLEASANT PLACE IT HAD BEEN.

NABU NA'ID STILL MADE NO MOVE TO RETURN TO THE CAPITAL. TRAVELERS WHO HAD SEEN THE PLACE WHERE HE WAS WORKING BROUGHT BACK REPORTS WHICH WERE GREATLY MAGNIFIED IN THE TELLING. RUMORS WERE GOING AROUND THAT THE KING HAD GONE COMPLETELY CRAZY; THAT HE WAS LIVING OUT IN THE FIELDS LIKE A WILD BEAST, EATING GRASS LIKE AN OX, THAT HIS HAIR AND BEARD RESEMBLED A LION'S MANE, THAT HE WORE NO CLOTHES, AND HIS NAILS WERE LIKE THE TALONS OF AN EAGLE.

DANIEL HAD GONE INTO RETIREMENT. AT SEVENTY-SIX HE WAS STILL ACTIVE AND VIGOROUS, BUT HE TOLD ME HE FOUND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO WORK UNDER THE QUEEN. HE TOOK AN ACTIVE PART IN OUR ASSOCIATION OF EXILES.

AFTER THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR, FOLLOWING MY BIRTHDAY SIXTY-SIX I DECIDED TO GO AND SEE WHAT NABU NA'ID WAS DOING. WE CLOSED UP THE HOUSE, LEAVING ONLY THE SERVANTS IN CHARGE. I INVITED DANIEL AND ISAIAH TO GO WITH ME, AND YESHUA ALSO. JERUSHA WENT ALONG AS FAR AS CEBAR, AND SPENT THE TIME VISITING KINDRED AND FRIENDS THERE.

WE FOUND THE KING AND HIS PARTY AT THE RUINS OF ANCIENT ERIDU. HE WAS WEARING ONLY A LOIN CLOTH, HIS BODY WAS BURNED BLACK BY THE SUN, BUT HE SEEMED SUPREMELY HAPPY. I TOLD HIM OF THE RUMORS THAT WERE CURRENT ABOUT HIM, AND HE LAUGHED UPREARILY.

"I AM DOING SOMETHING IMPORTANT HERE," HE SAID. "THIS PLACE HAS BEEN IN RUINS FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS." HE SHOWED US HOW HE HAD COPIED EVERY ANCIENT INSCRIPTION, MAKING LISTS OF NAMES, AND ESTABLISHING DATES.

I TOLD HIM ABOUT THE FALL OF SARDIS. HE WAS NOT DISTURBED.

"I KNEW IT WAS COMING," HE SAID. "AND I SURE AM GLAD TO BE OUT OF IT ALL. ALL THIS BUSINESS OF EMPIRE IS A LOT OF NONSENSE. LOOK AT THIS PLACE. AWAY BACK THERE, HUNDREDS AND HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, WHEN LUR SIN, GIMIL SIN, AND ALL THOSE REIGNED AT UR -- THEY THOUGHT EMPIRE WAS THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERED. AND WHERE ARE THEY NOW? THE PEASANT YONDER, WATERING HIS GARDEN AND TENDING HIS DATE PALMS, HAS A MUCH MORE SATISFACTORY LIFE. LET CYRUS TAKE THE PLACE, AND SEE WHAT HE CAN DO WITH IT. AND ONE OF THESE DAYS, SOMEBODY WILL BE DIGGING UP HIS RUINS, JUST AS I AM DOING HERE."

I WAS INCLINED TO AGREE WITH HIM. BUT THE THOUGHT OF GETTING OUR PEOPLE BACK TO THE LAND THAT GOD HAD PROMISED TO OUR FOREFATHERS WAS STILL IMPORTANT TO ME.

ON THE WAY BACK WE TALKED ABOUT IT. ISAIAH WAS JOVIALANT. "LOOK!" HE SAID, "IT HAS JUST COME TO ME. CYRUS IS THE ONE! YAHWEH HAS RAISED HIM UP FOR THIS! HE WILL CONQUER BABYLON, AND HE WILL SEND OUR PEOPLE BACK TO OUR OWN LAND!"

"I HOPE YOU ARE RIGHT," HIS FATHER SAID. "I WILL PRAY FOR THAT, AND MAYBE IT WILL WORK OUT THAT WAY. BUT IF CYRUS GIVES UP ANYTHING, IT WILL BE THE FIRST KING I EVER HEARD OF WHO DID."

"BUT HE WILL!" ISAIAH SAID. "I CAN SEE IT! I AM NOT SURE JUST HOW IT WILL WORK OUT, BUT I AM SURE IT WILL BE SO. YOU JUST WAIT!"

WE WAITED.

DAUGHTER OF THE CHILDRENS

THREE YEARS WENT BY AFTER THE FALL OF BABYLON BEFORE THE ARMIES OF CYRUS MADE ANOTHER SERIOUS ATTACK. THEY WERE CONSOLIDATING THEIR GAINS, GETTING READY FOR THE BIG PUSH. WE ALL KNEW IT WAS COMING; WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT WAS ANOTHER QUESTION.

AT LEAST IT GAVE TIME TO COMPLETE THE FORTIFICATIONS AROUND THE CITY OF BAB-EL. MAGNIFICENT THEY WERE, BEYOND ANY DOUBT. THE GENERALS HAD TRIED TO PERSUADE THE QUEEN THAT FORTIFICATIONS IN OTHER PLACES WOULD BE MORE EFFECTUAL FOR DEFENSE, BUT SHE WOULD NOT LISTEN. BAB-EL MUST BE SECURE, AND WITH SUCH WALLS NO ENEMY COULD EVER HOPE TO SET FOOT IN THE CAPITAL CITY.

IT WAS IN THE SPRING, SHORTLY AFTER MY BIRTHDAY SIXTY-NINE THAT WE RECEIVED THE NEWS THAT THE MEDES AND PERSIANS, IN GREAT FORCE, WERE ATTACKING BABYLON. PEOPLE IN THE CAPITAL TRIED TO BE CHEERFUL, SAYING, "OH, BABYLON WILL HOLD! THEY CAN NEVER TAKE BABYLON! OR IF THEY DID, THERE WOULD STILL BE ASSHUR. AND IF ASSHUR SHOULD FALL, NINEVEH HAS FORTIFICATIONS ALMOST EQUAL TO THESE! WE ARE SECURE. THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR." ALL OF THIS, I THOUGHT, WAS LIKE ONE WHISTLING IN THE DARK, TO DUST HIS CLOAKS.

BUT BEFORE THE SUMMER'S END, BABYLON HAD FALLEN, AND SOON WE LEARNED THAT ASSHUR WAS UNDER SIEGE. CLEARLY, THE EMPIRE WAS DOOMED. THE ONLY HOPE WOULD BE TO TRY TO MAKE PEACE WITH CYRUS, AND THAT WOULD MEAN TO SURRENDER AND PAY TRIBUTE. THAT WAS UNTHINKABLE! SOME OF THE NOBLES VENTURED TO OFFER ADVICE OF SUCH A COURSE, AND WERE IMMEDIATELY CITED FOR TREASON BY THE QUEEN, AND SUMMARILY EXECUTED.

ISAIAH WAS JUDILANT ABOUT IT. "IT IS COMING!" HE SAID. "YAHWEH IS BRINGING ON OUR DELIVERANCE!" HE WROTE MORE AND MORE POEMS, WORKS OF GREAT BEAUTY, FORETELLING THE DELIVERANCE. HE FORESAW THE ARGUMENTS OF PEOPLE WHO WOULD SAY, "OH, IT CAN'T BE DONE! WE ARE TOO FEW! WE CAN'T POSSIBLY DO IT!" AND HE ANSWERED, "IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR GOD? LOOK WHERE IT ALL STARTED. YAHWEH CALLED ABRAHAM, HE WAS ONLY ONE BUT GOD BROUGHT HIS PURPOSE TO PASS, AND LOOK AT US NOW — THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF US!"

OUR ASSOCIATION OF THE CHILDREN IN EXILE WAS BUSY, MAKING COPIES OF THESE POEMS, AND SENDING THEM AROUND TO ALL THE COLONIES OF ISRAELITES THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, HOPING TO STIR UP ENTHUSIASM FOR THE DELIVERANCE WHICH WE WERE NOW CONVINCED MUST COME TO PASS AFTER THE FALL OF BAB-EL TO CYRUS. ENTHUSIASM GREW SLOWLY, BUT STILL MANY PEOPLE SAID, "ACROSS THAT DESERT AGAIN? NO! THERE'S NO USE TO HOPE FOR SUCH A THING."

BUT ISAIAH CONTINUED TO WRITE. "GOD BROUGHT OUR FOREFATHERS OUT OF EGYPT. HE BROUGHT THEM THROUGH THE SEA, NOW HE CAN TAKE US THROUGH THE DESERT. THERE WILL BE A HIGHWAY THROUGH THE DESERT, A SMOOTH ROAD, EASY TO TRAVEL. THE HILLS WILL BE LEVELED, THE RAVINES FILLED IN, THE STONES REMOVED, INSTEAD OF THICKY SCRUB WILL BE TREES OF UTILITY AND BEAUTY."

SOME OF THIS WRITING, I THOUGHT, MIGHT WELL BE CONSIDERED SEDITIOUS. WE WERE CITIZENS OF BAB-EL, MANY OF US WERE GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, MANY OF OUR YOUNG MEN WERE ENLISTED IN THE ARMY, SOME WERE HIGH RANKING OFFICERS. I ADMIRER ISAIAH'S WORK, I WAS CONVINCED THAT HE WAS TRULY A PROPHET INSPIRED BY YAHWEH, AND I FULLY AGREED WITH ALL HE SAID. BUT I WAS FEARFUL FOR HIS LIFE IF THESE WRITINGS SHOULD EVER BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF THE GOVERNMENT, ESPECIALLY OF THE QUEEN.

ONE POEM SEEMED FLAGRANTLY SEDITIOUS:

"COME DOWN AND SIT IN THE DUST, O VIRGIN DAUGHTER OF BAB-ILU,
SIT ON THE GROUND, NOT ON A THRONE, DAUGHTER OF THE CHALDEANS!
NO MORE SHALL YOU BE CALLED TENDER AND DELICATE,
TAKE UP THE MILLSTONES AND GRIND, PUT OFF YOUR VEIL.
PULL UP YOUR ROBES, UNCOVER YOUR LEGS, WADE THE RIVERS.
YOUR NAKEDNESS SHALL BE EXPOSED, YOUR SHAME SHALL BE SEEN.
I WILL TAKE VENGEANCE, I WILL SPARE NO ONE,
SAYS OUR REDEEMER, YAHWEH OF HOSTS, THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL.

"SIT IN SILENCE, GO INTO DARKNESS, O DAUGHTER OF AKKAD,
NO LONGER SHALL YOU BE CALLED THE MISTRESS OF KINGDOMS.
I WAS ANGRY WITH MY PEOPLE; MY PEOPLE, MY HERITAGE, I PROFANED.
I GAVE THEM INTO YOUR HAND, YOU SHOWED THEM NO MERCY.
EVEN ON THE AGED YOU PLACED A HEAVY YOKER.
YOU SAID, 'I WILL BE MISTRESS FOR EVER'. YOU NEVER THOUGHT
THAT THE SELF SAME THING COULD HAPPEN TO YOU.

"NOW THEREFORE HEAR THIS, LOVER OF PLEASURE WHO SIT SECURE,
SAYING IN YOUR HEART, 'I AM THE ONLY ONE THAT MATTERS --
I SHALL NEVER BECOME A WIDOW, OR LOSE MY CHILDREN'.
BOTH THESE CALAMITIES SHALL COME TO YOU AT ONCE, IN ONE DAY,
LOSS OF CHILDREN AND WIDOWHOOD SHALL COME TO YOU IN FULL MEASURE,
IN SPITE OF YOUR SORCERIES, YOUR SO-CALLED ENCHANTMENTS.

"IN YOUR WICKEDNESS YOU FELT SECURE, SAYING, 'NO ONE CAN SEE ME,
YOUR SO-CALLED WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE DECEIVED YOU.
YOU SAID IN YOUR HEART, 'I AM THE ONLY ONE THAT MATTERS'.
DISASTER SHALL STRIKE YOU WHICH YOU CANNOT EXPIATE,
RUIN SHALL COME UPON YOU, SUCH AS YOU HAVE NEVER DREAMED.

"YOU TRUST IN YOUR ENCHANTMENTS, IN YOUR MANY SORCERIES,
CUSTOMS YOU HAVE PRACTICED FROM OF OLD --
SEE IF THEY WILL SAVE YOU NOW, STRIKE TERROR IN YOUR ENEMIES!
MANY HAVE BEEN YOUR COUNSELORS, LET THEM COME TO YOUR RESCUE,
THOSE WHO READ THE FUTURE IN THE STARS,
OR FORETELL COMING EVENTS BY THE MOON!

"THEY ARE LIKE STRAW, IN THE PRESENCE OF FIRE,
THEY ARE HELPLESS BEFORE THE POWER OF THE FLAME.
COMING IS A FIRE OF DESTRUCTION, NOT FOR COMFORT OR WARMTH,
THEY WANDER HELPLESSLY, COMPLETELY UNABLE TO SAVE YOU."

"THAT IS GREAT POETRY, ISAIAH," I SAID. "BUT IF IT SHOULD FALL INTO THE
HANDS OF THE QUEEN OR HER ADVISERS I AM AFRAID YOU WOULD BE IN GRAVE TROUBLE!"
"I KNOW THAT," HE SAID. "IN FACT, I HAVE A FEELING THAT I AM BRINGING
ON MY OWN DUM. BUT I HAVE TO WRITE WHAT YAHWEH PUTS INTO MY HEART TO WRITE,
WHATEVER MAY HAPPEN TO ME."

"HAS THIS BEEN DISTRIBUTED?"

"I GAVE A COPY TO THE ASSOCIATION, AND I IMAGINE THEY HAVE SENT COPIES TO MOST OF THE KENOSHETS HERE AND IN CHEDAR."

"I HAD HOPED THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN KEPT UNDER WRAPS FOR A WHILE, FOR YOUR SAFETY. BUT WHAT IS DONE IS DONE. LET'S HOPE AND PRAY THAT THEY DON'T GET YOU IN TROUBLE."

"I HAVE WRITTEN SOME OTHERS THAT MIGHT BE CONSIDERED EVEN MORE SEDITIOUS THAN THIS," HE SAID -- "SOME IN PRAISE OF CYRUS, AS GOD'S INSTRUMENT, FOR THE DELIVERANCE OF HIS PEOPLE. THOSE, I HAVE NOT SHOWN TO ANYONE YET. HE DREW OUT SEVERAL SHEETS OF PAPER FROM HIS CAPE, AND HELD THEM OUT TO ME."

"LET ME KEEP THESE," I SAID. "THEY MAY BE USEFUL WHEN THINGS COME TO A HEAD."

HE GAVE THEM TO ME. "YOU KNEW CYRUS PERSONALLY, DIDN'T YOU, WHEN YOU WERE IN EGGATANA?"

"YES," I SAID.

"MAYBE IF YOU SHOWED THEM TO HIM...."

"I WAS THINKING OF THAT," I SAID.

I WENT TO TALK TO YESHUA AND DANIEL ABOUT THESE WRITINGS. THEY TOO WERE CONCERNED ABOUT WHAT MIGHT BE THE CONSEQUENCES IF THIS POEM PREDICTING THE FALL OF BAD-EL SHOULD FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE QUEEN.

"IT OCCURRED TO ME," DANIEL SAID, "THAT IF ISAIAH SHOULD BE ACCUSED OF TREASON ALL OF HIS WRITINGS MIGHT BE CONFISCATED. I WANT THEM PRESERVED, AND HAVE SECRETED COPIES OF THEM -- GUERS WHERE."

I SCRATCHED MY HEAD IN THOUGHT.

"I ATTACHED THEM TO THE WRITINGS OF ISAIAH, THE SON OF AMEZ, IN OUR SACRED BOOKS. I HOPE THEY WILL BE SAFE THERE."

"THERE ARE SOME THAT HE JUST GAVE ME," I SAID. "HAVE COPIES MADE, AND HIDE THEM TOO. THEN GIVE ME BACK THE ORIGINALS. I MAY HAVE A USE FOR THEM."

THIS WAS DULY ATTENDED TO. I KEPT THE POEMS ABOUT CYRUS IN A SAFE PLACE. I THOUGHT THAT AFTER THE CITY WAS TAKEN, IF I SURVIVED THE HORRORS OF THE SIEGE, I MIGHT SHOW THEM TO CYRUS, AND PERHAPS GET A FAVORABLE DECISION FROM HIM, ABOUT OUR RETURN TO JERUSALEM. I HOPED THAT CYRUS MIGHT STILL REMEMBER ME.

AND ISAIAH'S PREMONITION WAS NOT AN IDLE FANCY. BY SOME CHANCE A COPY OF THE POEM ABOUT THE FALL OF BAD-EL CAME TO THE ATTENTION OF ONE OF THE QUEEN'S ADVISERS WHO KNEW HEBREW. HE TOLD THE QUEEN ABOUT IT, AND HER FURY KNEW NO BOUNDS. SHE DENOUNCED ISAIAH AS A TRAITOR, AND ORDERED HIS ARREST, AND ALL HIS WRITINGS CONDEMNED AND DESTROYED. ISAIAH WAS IMPRISONED, AND SOON WE LEARNED THAT HE HAD BEEN CRUELLY PUT TO DEATH. WE MOURNED GREATLY FOR HIM. I STILL BELIEVE HE DESERVES TO RANK AMONG THE GREATEST OF OUR PROPHETS.

THERE WAS QUITE A HUE AND CRY ABOUT ISAIAH'S WRITINGS. WHEREVER ANY OF THEM COULD BE FOUND, THEY WERE CONFISCATED AND BURNED PUBLICLY. THE INQUISITORS SEARCHED THE OFFICES OF OUR ASSOCIATION OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL IN EXILE. THEY EXAMINED OUR SACRED BOOKS, BUT BILKAR SWORE SOLEMNLY THAT THERE WAS NOTHING OF ISAIAH'S WRITING AMONG THEM. EVEN SO, THE CLERKS MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN CONFISCATED, BUT JUST THEN CAME THE NEWS OF THE FALL OF NINEVEH, AND IN THE EXCITEMENT THE MATTER WAS FORGOTTEN. IT WAS MANY YEARS BEFORE BILKAR DISCOVERED THAT HE HAD SWORN FALSELY.

55

NOW THERE WAS NO OTHER STRONG POINT BETWEEN THE ADVANCING ARMIES AND THE CAPITAL. THE QUEEN ISSUED A STATEMENT THAT THERE WAS NOTHING TO FEAR, THAT THE CITY COULD HOLD OUT FOR EVER. ALL THE PUBLIC GRANARIES WERE FULL, AND INDIVIDUALS LAID UP STOCKS OF FOOD. THE RIVER FURNISHED PLenty OF WATER.

"BAD-ILU CAN NEVER BE TAKEN" WAS THE CRY ON EVERYONE'S LIPS.

THE ANOINTED OF YAHWEH

IN VARIOUS POEMS OF ISAIAH THERE WERE REFERENCES TO THE IMPENDING JUDGMENT ON BAD-EL, AND THE DELIVERANCE OF GOD'S PEOPLE. THERE WERE EVEN VEILED REFERENCES TO CYRUS. ALTHOUGH THE QUEEN DID NOT READ HEBREW, SOME OF HER COUNSELORS COULD TRANSLATE THEM FOR HER. AND EVEN IF MUCH OF THE WRITING WAS IN FIGURES THAT MEANT LITTLE WHEN TRANSLATED, STILL THE POEMS MUST HAVE SEEMED HIGHLY SEDITIOUS, AND NO DOUBT THE QUEEN FELT FULLY JUSTIFIED IN HAVING ISAIAH PUT TO DEATH. BUT IF SHE HAD SEEN THE POEM THAT I HAD SECRETED, WHICH OPENLY PREDICTED THE VICTORY OF CYRUS, CALLING HIM BY NAME, SHE WOULD PROBABLY HAVE ORDERED SPECIAL TORTURES FOR THE WRITER.

WE MOURNED FOR ISAIAH, AND FELT KEENLY THE LOSS OF OUR PROPHET. TO ME HE WAS NOT ONLY PROPHET, BUT CLOSE PERSONAL FRIEND. BUT DEATH COMES TO US ALL, AND PROPHETS HAVE OFTEN ENCOUNTERED CRUEL PERSECUTION. I THOUGHT OF THE FIRST ISAIAH, CRUELLY MURDERED DURING MANASSEH'S REIGN; OF ELIJAH, HUNTED DOWN BY AHAB, AND PARTICULARLY BY JEZEBEL, AND OF THE VICIOUS TREATMENT OF JEREMIAH BY JEHOLIAKIM AND ZEDEKIAH. IT WAS NO LIGHT THING TO BE A PROPHET, I REFLECTED.

IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT IN NONE OF ISAIAH'S POEMS DID HE EVER MENTION HIMSELF. HE WROTE ABOUT YAHWEH, ABOUT HIS POWER AND MAJESTY, AND HIS PURPOSE OF REDEMPTION OF HIS PEOPLE. IN THIS POEM HE CALLS CYRUS BY NAME, MORE THAN ONCE. BUT THE POEM WAS NOT ABOUT CYRUS, EXCEPT AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF YAHWEH'S PURPOSE. I READ THE POEM AGAIN, STIRRED TO THE DEPTH OF MY BEING:

"REMEMBER THESE THINGS, O JACOB, AND ISRAEL, FOR YOU ARE MY SERVANT:
I FORMED YOU, YOU ARE MY SERVANT, ISRAEL, I WILL NEVER FORGET YOU.
I HAVE GLOTTED OUT YOUR SINS LIKE A CLOUD,
SWEEPED THEM AWAY LIKE MIST.
RETURN TO ME, FOR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU.

"SING, O HEAVENS, FOR YAHWEH HAS DONE IT!
SHOUT, YE DEPTHS OF THE EARTH!
FOR YAHWEH HAS REDEEMED JACOB, HE WILL BE GLORIFIED IN ISRAEL!

"THUS SAYS YAHWEH, YOUR REDEEMER,
WHO FORMED YOU FROM THE BEGINNING:
I AM YAHWEH, WHO MADE ALL THINGS,
WHO STRETCHED OUT THE HEAVENS ALONE,
WHO SPREAD OUT THE EARTH WITH NONE TO HELP ME;
WHO CONFOUNDS THE OMENS OF THE PROPHETS,
AND MAKES THE DIVINERS LOOK LIKE FOOLS!

"WHO TURNS BACK WISE MEN,
 RENDERS ALL THEIR KNOWLEDGE MERE FOOLISHNESS;
 WHO CONFIRMS THE WORD OF HIS SERVANTS,
 THE COUNSEL OF HIS MESSENGERS;
 WHO SAYS OF JERUSALEM, 'SHE SHALL BE INHABITED';
 AND OF THE CITIES OF JUDAH, 'THEY SHALL BE BUILT';
 AND I WILL RAISE UP THEIR RUINS.¹
 WHO SAYS TO THE DEEP, 'BE DRY, I WILL DRY UP YOUR RIVERS';
 WHO SAYS OF CYRUS, 'HE IS MY SHEPHERD,
 AND HE SHALL FULFIL ALL MY PURPOSE';
 SAYING OF JERUSALEM, 'SHE SHALL BE REBUILT';
 AND OF THE TEMPLE, 'YOUR FOUNDATIONS SHALL BE LAID'.²

"THUS SAYS YAHWEH TO HIS ANOINTED, TO CYRUS,
 WHOSE RIGHT HAND I HAVE GRASPED,
 TO SUBDUCE NATIONS BEFORE HIM,
 BRING TO NAUGHT THE POWER OF KINGS,
 TO OPEN GATES BEFORE HIM, DOORS THAT MAY NOT BE CLOSED:
 'I WILL GO BEFORE YOU, TO SMOOTH YOUR WAY,
 DOORS OF BRONZE WILL I BREAK IN PIECES,
 BARS OF IRON I WILL CUT IN TWO.
 I WILL GIVE YOU THE HIDDEN TREASURES, HOARDS LAID UP IN SECRET,
 THAT YOU MAY KNOW THAT IT IS I, YAHWEH, THE GOD OF ISRAEL,
 FOR THE SAKE OF ISRAEL, MY CHOSEN, I CALL YOU BY NAME.
 I CALL YOU BY NAME, THOUGH YOU DO NOT KNOW ME.
 I AM YAHWEH, AND THERE IS NO OTHER,
 BESIDES ME THERE IS NO GOD AT ALL!³

"I ESTABLISH YOU, THOUGH YOU DO NOT KNOW ME,
 THAT MEN MAY KNOW, FROM THE RISING OF THE SUN,
 AND EVEN FROM ITS SETTING, THAT THERE IS NONE BESIDES ME;
 I AM YAHWEH, AND THERE IS NO OTHER!
 I FORM LIGHT, AND CREATE DARKNESS,
 I MAKE WEAL, AND CREATE WOE,
 I AM YAHWEH, WHO DO ALL THESE THINGS.⁴

"SHOWER, O HEAVENS, FROM ABOVE,
 LET THE SKIES RAIN DOWN RIGHTEOUSNESS!
 LET THE EARTH OPEN, THAT SALVATION MAY COME FORTH,
 LET IT CAUSE RIGHTEOUSNESS TO SPRING UP ALSO,
 FOR I, YAHWEH, HAVE CREATED IT SO!⁵

AH, I THOUGHT, IF I COULD ONLY GET A CHANCE TO SHOW THIS TO CYRUS, TRY
 TO LET HIM GRASP THE VISION OF YAHWEH'S PURPOSE, GIVING HIM SUCCESS IN
 ORDER TO REDEEM HIS CHOSEN PEOPLE! I TALKED TO JERUSHA ABOUT IT. SHE FELT
 THE SAME WAY.

"IS THERE ANY WAY YOU COULD GET IN TOUCH WITH HIM?" SHE ASKED.

97

"I HAVE NO IDEA WHERE CYRUS IS AT PRESENT," I SAID. "I AM NOT EVEN CERTAIN THAT HE WOULD REMEMBER ME, OR LISTEN TO ME AT ALL. AND IF I SHOULD LEAVE THE CITY TO TRY TO MAKE CONTACT WITH HIM, IT MIGHT WELL JEOPARDIZE YOU, AND ALL OUR PEOPLE. WE SHALL HAVE TO WAIT, AND TRUST THAT GOD WILL OPEN UP A WAY."

JERUSHA SIGHED. "IT IS HARD TO BE PATIENT," SHE SAID.

THE AGREEMENT

AFTER THE FALL OF MINIVER, I EXPECTED THE PERSIAN ARMY TO ATTACK BAD-EL IMMEDIATELY, BUT THEY DID NOT. TWO YEARS WENT BY, WHILE CYRUS WATCHED HIS TROOPS SPREAD OUT OVER THE COUNTRY. CITY AFTER CITY SURRENDERED WITHOUT A STRUGGLE. ONLY BAD-EL REMAINED. WHEN BAD-EL WAS TAKEN, CYRUS WOULD BE ABSOLUTE RULER OF EVERYTHING FROM THE INDUS RIVER TO THE GREAT SEA.

BAD-EL WAS DOOMED. EVERYBODY COULD SEE IT -- EVERYBODY BUT THE QUEEN. OBVIOUSLY IT WAS TIME TO SUE FOR PEACE, AND ACCEPT SUCH TERMS AS THE INVADERS MIGHT DICTATE. BUT THE STUBBORN QUEEN STILL HELD OUT.

"NEVER!" SHE SAID. "WE WILL NEVER SURRENDER. WITH THESE WALLS WE CAN HOLD OUT FOR EVER. OUR SUPPLIES OF FOOD ARE UNLIMITED. NO TALK OF PEACE! OUR ARMIES ARE STILL INTACT, WE CAN DEFEAT THE ENEMY YET. NO! LET ME HEAR NO TALK OF SURRENDER!"

THE ARMIES OF AKKAD HAD TAKEN UP DEFENSIVE POSITION BETWEEN THE CAPITAL AND THE INVADING FORCES. THERE THEY STAYED, AS THE MONTHS WENT BY, AND THE PERSIANS MADE NO MOVE TO DISLodge THEM. CYRUS FELT SURE THAT THERE WOULD BE AN EMBASSAGE SEEKING PEACE. HE COULD WAIT, BUT TIME WENT ON, NO EMBASSAGE CAME.

THE NOBLES HELD A MEETING TO SEE WHAT MIGHT BE DONE. THERE SEEMED TO BE NO HOPE OF CHANGING THE QUEEN'S ATTITUDE. THEY KNEW THAT UNLESS TERMS OF SURRENDER COULD BE AGREED ON, CYRUS WOULD TAKE THE CITY, NO MATTER HOW LONG IT TOOK, OR THE LOSSES INVOLVED. AND AT THE LAST, ALL THAT COULD BE EXPECTED WOULD BE TOTAL DESTRUCTION.

ONE OF THE NOBLES, NERGAL-SHU-LU, HEAD OF ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CLANS, THOUGHT OF A PLAN. HE HAD A BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER, THIRTEEN YEARS OLD, A SUITABLE CONSORT FOR THE YOUNG PRINCE, BELSHAZZAR.

BELSHAZZAR WAS FIFTEEN, WELL DEVELOPED FOR HIS AGE, HIS BEARD BEGINNING TO SHOW. HE HAD BEEN BROUGHT UP BY HIS GRANDMOTHER, AND WAS THE APPLE OF HER EYE. HE WAS KNOWN TO BE IMPETUOUS AND DEMANDING, BUT SURELY, IF HE WERE CROWNED KING, HE COULD BE MADE TO SEE REASON BEFORE TOTAL DESTRUCTION CAME ON THEM ALL.

"THE SOLUTION TO OUR PROBLEM," NERGAL-SHU-LU SAID, "IS TO HAVE A ROYAL WEDDING, CROWN THE YOUNG MAN KING, AND AFTER HE HAS RECEIVED THE ROYAL AUTHORITY, WE CAN HOPE TO COME TO TERMS WITH OUR ENEMIES."

THAT SOUNDED LIKE A GOOD PLAN. CERTAINLY THERE WAS NO OTHER PLAN THAT SEEMED FEASIBLE. THE PRINCE WAS QUITE WILLING TO TAKE A WIFE, AND THE PROSPECT OF BECOMING SUPREME RULER WITHOUT WAITING SEVERAL YEARS APPEALED TO HIM. HE AGREED TO THE PROPOSAL.

EVEN THE QUEEN GRASPED THAT HER GRANDSON MADE KING WITHOUT FURTHER DELAY WAS SUCH A WONDERFUL THING THAT SHE COULD EVEN CONSENT TO RELINQUISH HER EXALTED POSITION.

SO FAR, SO GOOD. THE ROYAL WEDDING WAS CELEBRATED, AND AFTERWARD THE CORONATION. THE YOUNG KING WAS A MAN IN STATURE, AND WITH THE ROYAL ROBES AND THE CROWN ON HIS HEAD HE LOOKED LIKE A KING. THERE WERE MANY SPEECHES MADE, FULL OF PATRIOTIC FERVOR. FILLED WITH A SENSE OF HIS OWN IMPORTANCE, BELSHAZZAR THOUGHT HE REALLY WAS A KING, AND AS SUCH, HE WAS INVINCIBLE. HE MAY HAVE BEEN A MAN IN STATURE, BUT IN HIS THINKING HE WAS A GULLIBLE CHILD.

STILL CYRUS HAD MADE NO MOVE. NEW STOREHOUSES HAD BEEN HASTILY ERECTED, AND ALL POSSIBLE GRAIN AND OTHER SUPPLIES WERE BEING GATHERED AND STORED, IN CASE OF A LONG SIEGE.

AFTER ALLOWING THE YOUNG KING TO ADJUST TO HIS NEW POSITION, A COMMITTEE OF THE COUNCILLORS WAITED ON THE KING. THEY POINTED OUT TO HIM, AS TACTFULLY AS POSSIBLE, THE PRECARIOUS SITUATION, AND ASKED PERMISSION TO SEND AN EMBASSAGE TO SEEK A BASIS OF AGREEMENT WITH THE INVADING FORCES.

BUT BELSHAZZAR, IMPETUOUS AS ALWAYS, WOULD HEAR NONE OF IT. ON THE CONTRARY, HE WAS FILLED WITH ROYAL ANGER.

"TREASON!" HE CRIED. "GUARDS, SEIZE THESE MEN! LET THEM BE EXECUTED AT ONCE! I AM THE MIGHTY RULER OF BABEL AND AKKAD AND THE FOUR REGIONS, AND I AM INVINCIBLE! I ORDER OUR ARMIES TO ADVANCE AND ATTACK THE INVADERS IMMEDIATELY, AND DRIVE THEM FOR EVER FROM OUR SOIL! THIS IS MY IRREVOCABLE DECREE! LET IT BE DONE WITHOUT DELAY!"

THE KING'S ORDERS MUST BE OBEYED. THE GENERALS OF THE ARMY KNEW THAT THEY HAD BEEN GIVEN AN IMPOSSIBLE MISSION, BUT THERE WAS NO CHOICE. THEY MADE SUCH PREPARATIONS AS THEY COULD, AND ADVANCED TO DO BATTLE. THEY WERE VASTLY OUTNUMBERED, AND THEY SUFFERED A CRUSHING DEFEAT. THE SURVIVORS TOOK REFUGE IN THE CITY, BEHIND THE IMPENETRABLE FORTIFICATIONS, TO AWAIT THE SIEGE. THE PERSIAN FORCES ADVANCED RELENTLESSLY, AND BEGAN TAKING UP POSITIONS AROUND THE CITY.

PEOPLE FROM THE SURROUNDING TOWNS AND VILLAGES CROWDED INTO THE CITY, OR ELSE FLED TO OTHER PLACES. OUR VILLA WAS OUTSIDE THE WALLS, WE HAD TO LEAVE IT. DANIEL OFFERED US LODGINGS IN HIS HOME, WHICH WE WERE GLAD TO ACCEPT.

IN THE BATTLE, MANY BRAVE MEN DIED, NOT A FEW OF THEM BEING MEN OF JUDAH WHO HAD ENLISTED IN THE ARMY OF THEIR CAPTOR NATION. ONE GRIEVOUS LOSS TO US WAS THE DEATH OF SHEALTIEL. HE WAS OUR LEADER, WE HAD CONFIDED THAT HE WOULD BE THE GUIDING LIGHT OF OUR RETURN, WHEN THE STRUGGLE WAS ENDED. NOW HE WAS LOST TO US FOR EVER.

I MET ZERUBBABEL IN THE STREET. HE WAS WEARING A SIGN OF MOURNING FOR HIS FATHER. I TRIED TO EXPRESS MY SYMPATHY, THOUGH MERE WORDS SEEMED INADEQUATE. ZERUBBABEL WAS COMMANDER OF A COMPANY. TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD, HE WAS AN IMPRESSIVE FIGURE OF A MAN. THE THOUGHT CAME TO ME, NOW, THIS IS OUR LEADER!

THE INVESTMENT OF THE CITY WAS COMPLETE, BUT NO OFFENSIVE ACTION WAS TAKEN AGAINST IT IMMEDIATELY. IT WOULD INDEED BE A DIFFICULT UNDERTAKING TO ATTACK THOSE MIGHTY WALLS.

"NOW OR NEVER!" I SAID TO MYSELF, IF I COULD MANAGE TO GET IN TOUCH WITH CYRUS, IF HE REMEMBERED ME, IF HE WOULD LISTEN TO ME AT ALL, IF ISAIAH'S POEM WOULD MAKE ANY IMPRESSION ON HIM, NOW WAS THE TIME TO TRY. IF THIS WAS REALLY YAHWEH'S WAY OF BRINGING ABOUT OUR DELIVERANCE, THE PLAN WOULD SUCCEED. AND IF NOT...

I TOLD DANIEL OF MY PLAN, AND HE APPROVED IT. BUT I SAID NOTHING TO ANY-ONE ELSE. BUT I DID APPROACH ZERUBBABEL, TO SEEK HIS HELP IN GETTING OUT OF THE CITY, AND BACK IN AGAIN.

"MY OUTFIT IS IN CHARGE OF THE SECTION ADJOINING THE NITOCRIS GARDENS," HE SAID. "THERE ARE MANY MEN OF JUDAH IN MY COMPANY. I CAN EASILY MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR YOU TO LEAVE AND RETURN."

I TOOK WITH ME A COPY OF THE POEM ABOUT CYRUS, AND A FLAG OF TRUCE, WHICH I UNFOLDED AFTER BEING PASSED THROUGH THE GATE. IT WAS A DARK NIGHT, BUT AS I DREW NEAR THE PERSIAN OUTPOST I WAVED THE FLAG, AND WAS ABLE TO ATTRACT ATTENTION. I SPOKE TO THE SOLDIER IN THE PERSIAN TONGUE, AND ASKED TO BE TAKEN TO HIS COMMANDING OFFICER. TO THE OFFICER I PRESENTED MY REQUEST TO BE ALLOWED TO SPEAK TO THE GREAT KING.

AFTER MAKING SURE I CARRIED NO WEAPONS, THE OFFICER SENT ME UNDER GUARD TO THE KING'S HEADQUARTERS. IT TURNED OUT TO BE NO OTHER THAN MY OWN VILLA. I WAS HAPPY TO SEE THE PLACE AGAIN, AND GLAD THAT IT WAS BEING CARED FOR.

THE GUARD TURNED ME OVER TO AN ADJUTANT, WHO AFTER SEARCHING ME ADMITTED ME INTO THE PRESENCE OF CYRUS. IT HAD BEEN MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS SINCE I HAD SEEN HIM. WE HAD BOTH CHANGED, BUT TO MY SURPRISE HE REMEMBERED ME.

"I CAN'T QUITE RECALL THE NAME," HE SAID, "BUT YOU WERE AMBASSADOR IN ECBATANA LONG AGO." I SUPPLIED THE NAME. HE GREETED ME LIKE A FRIEND, AND ORDERED WINE TO BE BROUGHT.

WE TALKED OVER OLD TIMES FOR A WHILE, THEN I DREW OUT THE POEM.

"I WANT TO READ THIS TO YOU," I SAID. "IT WAS WRITTEN ABOUT YOU BY A PROPHET OF OUR PEOPLE. IT IS WRITTEN IN HEBREW. YOU DON'T KNOW HEBREW, DO YOU? FEW WORDS, BUT NOT ENOUGH TO FOLLOW THAT, I'M AFRAID."

I HAD OBSERVED THAT, IN EGYPT, IN GREECE, IN PERSIA, WHEREVER I HAD BEEN, WHATEVER THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE PEOPLE MIGHT BE, THEY HAD ONE THING IN COMMON — THEY ALL BELIEVED IN THE POSSIBILITY OF PROPHECY.

"DID YOU SAY THE AUTHOR IS A PROPHET?" HE ASKED.

"HE WAS A PROPHET," I SAID. "UNFORTUNATELY, HE WAS CHARGED WITH TREASON FOR PREDICTING THE DOWNFALL OF BABYLON, AND WAS PUT TO DEATH ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO. BUT HE WAS A PROPHET, AND A VERY GREAT ONE. HE WAS A GREAT POET, TOO. THIS WAS ONE OF THE LAST THINGS HE WROTE. I'LL TRANSLATE, AS WELL AS I CAN, THOUGH MY PERSIAN IS FAR FROM PERFECT."

CYRUS LISTENED ATTENTIVELY. THE POEM LOST MUCH OF ITS BEAUTY IN TRANSLATION, BUT I THINK I GOT THE SENSE OF IT ACROSS PRETTY WELL. WHEN I HAD FINISHED, CYRUS SAT SILENT FOR A LONG TIME. I WAITED FOR HIM TO SPEAK.

"AND THIS PROPHET," HE SAID AT LAST, "BELIEVED THAT YOUR GOD HAS A DESTINY FOR ME — TO DO WHAT, EXACTLY?"

"WHEN OUR NATION REBELLED AGAINST THE AUTHORITY OF NEBUCHADREZZAR, ALMOST FIFTY YEARS AGO NOW, OUR CITY, JERUSALEM, WAS DESTROYED COMPLETELY. IT IS STILL IN RUINS. OUR PEOPLE WERE BROUGHT TO AKKAD, NOT AS SLAVES, WHICH MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN THE CASE, BUT AS COLONISTS. WE BELIEVE THAT THIS CAME UPON US AS A PUNISHMENT, BECAUSE WE HAD BEEN UNFAITHFUL TO OUR GOD, AND HAD NOT OBEYED HIS LAW. BUT WE BELIEVE THAT IT IS THE PURPOSE OF OUR GOD TO RESTORE US TO OUR OWN LAND, AND GIVE US ANOTHER CHANCE. THIS PROPHET DECLARES THAT YOU ARE THE ONE OUR GOD HAS APPOINTED, TO BRING THIS TO PASS."

"AND WHAT ABOUT MY GOD?" CYRUS ASKED.

"THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD," I REPLIED. "YOU CALL HIM AHURA MAZDA; WE CALL HIM YAHWEH. HE IS THE CREATOR OF ALL THINGS, AND LORD OVER ALL NATIONS. OTHER SO-CALLED GODS ARE A MERE VANITY. AND YAHWEH HAS CHOSEN THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL TO BE HIS SPECIAL PEOPLE, TO BE HIS SERVANT, TO BRING THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIM TO ALL PEOPLES. SO THIS PROPHET SAYS IT, AND I BELIEVE IT IS A TRUE REVELATION."

"THAT IS QUITE A THOUGHT," CYRUS SAID. "AND THESE PEOPLE OF YOURS — HOW MANY ARE THEY?"

"MANY THOUSANDS; I CAN'T GIVE YOU EXACT NUMBERS."

"AND YOUR IDEA IS THAT AFTER I TAKE THIS CITY I SHOULD RELEASE YOUR PEOPLE TO GO BACK WHERE YOU WERE? THAT IS A LARGE ORDER. DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DO IT?"

"IT WILL BE DIFFICULT," I ADMITTED. "BUT I BELIEVE WE CAN DO IT. I CAME OVER THAT LONG ROAD ALMOST SIXTY YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS A LAD OF SIXTEEN. I KNOW IT WILL BE DIFFICULT, ESPECIALLY FOR A LARGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE. BUT I BELIEVE THAT WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD WE CAN DO IT."

"AND, SUPPOSING I SHOULD GRANT YOUR REQUEST, WHAT WOULD YOU DO WHEN YOU GOT THERE — IF YOU SHOULD SUCCEED IN GETTING THERE AT ALL?"

"WE WOULD TRY TO REBUILD OUR CITY, AND ESPECIALLY REBUILD THE TEMPLE OF YAHWEH, WHICH WAS DESTROYED, AND ESTABLISH HOMES FOR OURSELVES; AND TRY TO RE-ESTABLISH OUR NATIONAL LIFE — AS A LOYAL PART OF YOUR EMPIRE."

SILENCE FOR A WHILE. AN OWL HOOED IN THE DISTANCE. "I'LL HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT," CYRUS SAID AT LAST.

"I WANT TO PROPOSE AN AGREEMENT WITH YOU," I SAID. "THE WORDS WENT BY DO

"WELL.....?"

"STARVING OUT THIS CITY WILL BE A LONG AND DIFFICULT BUSINESS. TAKING IT BY STORM WOULD INVOLVE MUCH BLOODSHED. IF I COULD ARRANGE FOR THE GATES TO BE OPENED QUIETLY, ALLOWING YOUR MEN TO COME IN, THE CITY MIGHT BE TAKEN WITH SCARCELY A STRUGGLE. IF I UNDERTAKE TO DO THAT, WILL YOU PROMISE TO RELEASE OUR PEOPLE TO RETURN TO THE HOMELAND?"

"YOU THINK YOU CAN DO THAT?"

"I BELIEVE I CAN."

"WOULD YOU NOT FEEL THAT YOU ARE A TRAITOR? YOU HAVE OCCUPIED RESPONSIBLE POSITIONS UNDER YOUR GOVERNMENT. CAN YOU NOW TURN AND BETRAY THAT GOVERNMENT?"

"I WOULD NOT CONSIDER MYSELF A TRAITOR," I SAID. "I HAVE BEEN A LOYAL SUBJECT OF THE KINGS OF BABYLON ALL MY ADULT LIFE, I HAVE SERVED THE GOVERNMENT, AND HAVE PROSPERED IN DOING SO. BUT MY FIRST LOYALTY IS TO YAHWEH MY GOD, AND AFTER THAT TO MY OWN PEOPLE. BUT I AM STILL LOYAL TO THE GOVERNMENT OF BABYLON AS LONG AS THERE IS A GOVERNMENT. BUT THE NATION IS CONQUERED, EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT, AND ONLY THE FOLLY OF A CHILDISHLY STUBBORN KING STANDS IN THE WAY OF SURRENDER. AND IF BY OPENING THE GATES I CAN SAVE THE LIVES OF THOUSANDS OF ITS PEOPLE, AS WELL AS OF YOUR SOLDIERS, I WOULD CONSIDER THAT AN ACT OF TRUE LOYALTY."

"WHEN AND HOW WOULD THIS BE DONE?"

I HAD BEEN THINKING ABOUT THAT. "IT WOULD NEED TO BE ON A DARK NIGHT," I SAID, "AND BY A SIGNAL AGREED UPON. THE MEN SHOULD COME SILENTLY, IN HOPES OF GETTING A GOOD NUMBER INSIDE THE GATE BEFORE ANY ALARM IS GIVEN. THEN THESE COULD HASTEN TO THE OTHER GATES, OVERCOME THE GUARDS, AND OPEN ALL THE GATES FOR THE WHOLE ARMY TO COME IN."

CYRUS NODDED AGREEMENT.

"I WILL FIND SOME WAY TO SEND A MESSAGE. I THINK THE BEST WAY WILL BE TO HAVE A SMALL BOY FLY A KITE FROM THE CITY WALL. THE STRING WILL BREAK, AND THE KITE WILL FALL WHERE YOUR MEN WILL BE SURE TO SEE IT. THERE WILL BE A WRITTEN MESSAGE ATTACHED. I THINK IT MIGHT BE WELL TO WRITE IN GREEK. YOU DO HAVE PEOPLE WHO READ GREEK, DO YOU NOT?"

"NO PROBLEM THERE."

"SO BE IT," I SAID. "AND I SUGGEST THAT THE SIGNAL TO LET US KNOW THAT THE MESSAGE HAS BEEN RECEIVED BE THREE RIDERS PASSING IN SINGLE FILE BY THE GATE ADJOINING THE GREAT GARDENS, AT SUNSET. IT MIGHT BE WELL TO REPEAT THE SIGNAL THREE DAYS, TO MAKE SURE IT HAS BEEN SEEN."

"IT SHALL BE DONE," SAID CYRUS.

"AND ONE REQUEST I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE. IF INDEED ENTRANCE BE EFFECTED IN THIS MANNER, THAT YOUR MEN BE INSTRUCTED TO AVOID UNNECESSARY VIOLENCE."

"AGREED," CYRUS SAID. "THERE WILL BE NO BLOOD."

I ROSE TO GO. CYRUS HELD OUT HIS HAND. "IT IS A DEAL," HE SAID. "AND YOU WILL FIND THAT MY PRISONERS ARE NOT KEPT BY HALVES."

MY HOPES SOARING, I MADE MY WAY BACK TO THE CITY GATE, GAVE THE SIGNAL, AGREED ON, AND WAS ALLOWED TO ENTER.

I TALKED TO ZERUBABEL ABOUT THE PLAN. HE READILY AGREED TO ASSIST IN CARRYING IT OUT, FEELING, AS I DID, THAT THIS WOULD NOT BE A BETRAYAL, BUT A TRUE LOYALTY TO HIS MILITARY SWORN. THE MESSAGE WE AGREED TO SEND WAS: "MIDNIGHT, THE NIGHT OF THE NEXT NEW MOON, THE NITOCRIS GATE, ADJOINING THE GREAT GARDEN."

THE CITY WALL WAS WIDE ENOUGH ON TOP FOR TWO CHARIOTS TO GO AGREAST. THERE WERE SOLDIERS PATROLLING IT AT ALL TIMES, BUT CIVILIANS WALKED THERE FREELY, AS NO COMBAT HAD BEGUN. ON A WIDE, BREEZY AFTERNOON I ASKED MY YOUNGEST GRANDSON IF HE WOULD NOT LIKE TO FLY A KITE FROM THE WALL, A NEW KITE I HAD GIVEN HIM. OF COURSE HE AGREED, AND WE MOUNTED THE STEPS TO THE WALL'S SUMMIT, AND SOON HAD THE KITE FLYING NICELY. THE MESSAGE HAD BEEN CAREFULLY SECRETED, AND THE SOLDIERS LOOKED ON AS WE LAUNCHED THE KITE, SUSPECTING NOTHING. AFTER IT HAD FLOWN FOR SOME TIME I TOOK HOLD OF THE STRING, AND QUICKLY ENFERMED IT. THE KITE FELL.

"NOW, THE STRING BROKE OF THE LITTLE BOY SAID. "NOW MY KITE IS LOST."

I CONSOLED HIM WITH THE PROMISE OF ANOTHER KITE. THE FOLLOWING DAY, AT SUNSET, I WATCHED FROM A HIGH POINT ON THE HANGING GARDEN, AND SAW THREE RIDERS PASS IN SINGLE FILE. WAR PLAN WAS SET IN MOTION.

THAT HAPPENED JUST BEFORE THE FULL MOON OF SPRING, THE TIME FOR OUR PASSOVER FEAST. FOOD WAS STILL PLentiful IN THE CITY. THERE WAS NO PROBLEM IN SECURING LAMBS FOR THE FEAST. I HAD SAID NOTHING TO ANYBODY ABOUT OUR PLAN, EXCEPT DANIEL AND ZERUBABELS, BUT ALL OUR PEOPLE, AS THEY GATHERED IN MANY HOMES THROUGHOUT THE CITY, SEEMED TO FEEL A NEW SENSE OF HOPE. AND AT EACH HOUSE, AS THE LAST CUP OF WINE WAS TAKEN, THE WATCHWORD WENT AROUND: "NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM!"

THE HAND WRITING ON THE WALL

THE DAY OF THE NEW MOON WAS ALWAYS CONSIDERED A HOLY DAY, MARKED BY FEASTS AND GATHERINGS OF ALL SORTS. NOW, IN A TIME OF NATIONAL CRISIS, IT TOOK ON SPECIAL IMPORTANCE. BELSHAZZAR, ANGRILY REJECTING ALL COUNSELS OF NEGOTIATIONS FOR PEACE, DECREED A SPECIAL CELEBRATION, TO INVOKE THE ASSISTANCE OF THE GODS. ONLY A MIRACLE BY THE GODS COULD SAVE THE NATION, IT WAS SAID. BELSHAZZAR ORDERED A MIGHTY FEAST AND SACRIFICE, TO CALL ON THE GODS FOR ASSISTANCE -- ON SIN, THE PARTICULAR DEITY OF THE MOON, ON BEL, THE KING'S PARTICULAR DEITY, NABU, ISHTAR, NERGAL, MARDUK, AND A HOST OF OTHERS. THE PEOPLE WERE ORDERED TO FEAST IN THEIR HOMES, AND FOR THE NOBILITY THERE WOULD BE A MAMMOTH FEAST AT THE PALACE. MANY ANIMALS WERE OFFERED IN SACRIFICE. IT WAS TO BE, NOT A NIGHT OF FASTING AND PRAYER, BUT OF FEASTING AND ORGIES.

VERY MANY ANIMALS HAD BEEN BROUGHT WITHIN THE WALLS, IN ANTICIPATION OF THE SIEGE. MANY OF THE KING'S COUNSELORS THOUGHT IT NOT A BAD IDEA TO SLAUGHTER A LOT OF ANIMALS, WHICH OTHERWISE WOULD HAVE TO BE FED, REDUCING STORES OF FOOD FOR HUMANS. CONSEQUENTLY, NOBODY PROTESTED THE FEASTING. BESIDES, A FEAST WAS ALWAYS A NICE THING TO HAVE -- LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE.

IT WAS PARTLY IN VIEW OF THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCH A CELEBRATION THAT I HAD CHOSEN THE NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON AS THE TIME FOR OPENING THE GATES. THE MORE PEOPLE WHO WERE FEASTING AND DRINKING AND CAROUSING, THE FEWER THERE WOULD BE WHO WERE KEEPING CLOSE WATCH, AND THEREFORE LESS CHANCE OF OUR PLAN BEING DISCOVERED.

I WAS NOT INVITED TO THE BANQUET. I WAS NOT IMPORTANT ENOUGH, SOCIALLY, TO WARRANT AN INVITATION. BESIDES, THE INVITATION COMMITTEE, KNOWING I WAS A DEVOTEE OF ANOTHER GOD, LEFT ME OUT BECAUSE OF THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT. ANYWAY,

I WAS NOT THERE. DANIEL WAS NOT INVITED EITHER. BESIDES OTHER CONSIDERATIONS, HE WAS RETIRED. BUT HE CAME IN AT THE END, AND AFTERWARD TOLD ME ABOUT WHAT WENT ON.

THE BANQUET WAS HELD IN THE LARGEST BANQUETING HALL IN THE PALACE, WHICH COULD ACCOMMODATE MORE THAN THREE THOUSAND. ADDITIONAL TABLES WERE BROUGHT IN, AND THE PLACE WAS CROWDED. WITH HUNDREDS OF LAMPS, IT WAS ALMOST AS BRIGHT AS DAY. ALL THE SOCIALLY OR POLITICALLY IMPORTANT PEOPLE WERE THERE, AND THE HIGH PRIESTS AND PRIESTESSES OF ALL THE GODS, ALL IN THEIR CEREMONIAL ROBES. THEY HAD ALREADY PRESIDED AT THE SACRIFICES OFFERED IN THE TEMPLES, AND DURING THE BANQUET MANY PRAYERS AND INCANTATIONS WERE OFFERED TO THE GODS. IT WAS MOSTLY A MALE AFFAIR -- WIVES WERE NOT INCLUDED, BUT THERE WERE MANY COURTESANS, AND SACRED PROSTITUTES OF THE TEMPLES, MALE AND FEMALE.

FOOD AND WINE WERE IN GREAT ABUNDANCE. ONE ASPECT OF THE FEAST WAS A CELEBRATION OF THE VICTORY OF THE GODS OF BAD-ILU OVER THE GODS OF OTHER NATIONS; AND AS A TOKEN OF SUCH VICTORY, SACRED VESSELS CAPTURED FROM THE TEMPLES OF MANY NATIONS WERE BROUGHT FROM THE ROYAL TREASURY AND PASSED AROUND, THE GUESTS DRINKING FROM THEM TO THE GLORY OF THEIR OWN GODS AND THE DEFEAT OF ALL OTHERS. THE FEASTING BEGAN ABOUT TWO HOURS AFTER SUNSET, AND SUCH BANQUETS GENERALLY CONTINUED UNTIL DAYBREAK. THERE WERE MANY MUSICIANS, TO ENTERTAIN THE GUESTS WITH INSTRUMENTS AND SONG.

ABOUT MIDNIGHT, WHEN THE FESTIVITIES WERE NEAR THEIR HEIGHT, SUDDENLY AN ARM AND HAND WERE SEEN TO EMERGE FROM BEHIND A TAPESTRY AND WRITE, WITH A BRUSH DIPPED IN PAINT, A FEW WORDS, IN LARGE LETTERS, BARELY VISIBLE TO ALL IN THE BANQUETING HALL. THEN THE HAND AND ARM DISAPPEARED BEHIND THE TAPESTRY, AND WERE SEEN NO MORE.

THE WORDS WERE WRITTEN IN ARAMAIC CHARACTERS. BUT WHILE MOST OF THOSE PRESENT WERE MORE OR LESS FAMILIAR WITH ARAMAIC WRITING, THE WORDS APPEARED TO MAKE NO SENSE. WHAT DID IT MEAN? WAS IT A REVELATION FROM THE GODS? WAS IT A PROMISE OF VICTORY? OR A THREAT? PEOPLE, ALREADY CONFUSED WITH WINE, WENT INTO A PANIC. SCREAMS BROKE OUT.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN? WHAT DOES IT MEAN?" THE CRIES CAME FROM ALL SIDES.

THE KING CALLED FOR SILENCE. HE WAS TERRIFIED, BUT TRIED TO PRESERVE SOME SEMBLANCE OF CALM. HE CALLED ON THE HIGH PRIEST OF BEL, HIS TITULAR DEITY, TO INTERPRET THE WRITING. THE PRIEST CONFESSED THAT IT WAS TOO MUCH FOR HIM. THEN HE CALLED ON OTHER PRIESTS, ALL OF WHOM WERE EQUALLY IMPOTENT.

"SEND FOR THE WISE MEN," THE KING CRIED. "THE ASTROLOGERS, THE MAGICIANS, THE NECROMANCERS, ALL OF THEM."

MESSENGERS WENT RUNNING TO BRING THESE MEN, MANY OF THEM OF VENERABLE AGE, FROM THE CITIES. THEY WERE BROUGHT IN LITTERS, POST HASTE. THE KING OFFERED FANTASTIC REWARDS FOR ANYONE WHO COULD READ THE WRITING. BUT ALL OF THEM WERE AFRAID TO OFFER ANY INTERPRETATION THAT WOULD MAKE ANY SENSE. THE PANIC WAS INCREASING BY THE MOMENT.

"SEND FOR THE QUEEN!" THE KING CRIES. "IF THERE IS ANYBODY WHO KNOWS WHAT TO DO IN THIS CRISIS, SURELY MY GRANDMOTHER IS THE ONE."

ACCORDINGLY MESSENGERS WERE SENT TO BRING THE QUEEN, IN A LITTER. SHE LOOKED AT THE MYSTERIOUS WRITING. SHE WAS UNABLE TO MAKE SENSE OF IT, BUT HAD AN IDEA.

"THERE IS A MAN WHO WAS COUNSELOR TO THE GREAT KING," SHE SAID. "HE IS NOW IN RETIREMENT, BUT IF THERE IS ANYBODY WHO CAN EXPLAIN THIS MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE, SURELY HE IS THE ONE. HIS NAME IS BELTEKMAZZAR. (DANIEL) SEND FOR HIM."

SO THE MESSENGERS WENT RUNNING AGAIN. DANIEL DID NOT HAVE TO BE DRAGGED OUT OF BED. HE WAS WIDE AWAKE, KEENLY INTERESTED IN WHAT WAS GOING ON. HE TOO WAS BROUGHT IN A LITTER, AT TOP SPEED.

AS HE CAME THROUGH THE STREETS, DANIEL HAD OBSERVED STEALTHY FIGURES HURRYING ALONG, AND WAS SURE THAT OUR PLAN WAS IN OPERATION.

DANIEL CAME INTO THE HALL, BOWED RESPECTFULLY TO THE QUEEN AND THE KING. THE KING REPEATED HIS OFFER OF INCREDIBLE REWARDS TO ANYONE WHO COULD INTERPRET THE WRITING.

DANIEL WAS EIGHTY-THREE YEARS OLD, BUT STILL STRONG AND VIGOROUS. HIS VOICE RANG OUT OVER ALL THE GUESTS, WHO FELL SILENT AS HE BEGAN TO SPEAK.

"I CAN READ THE WRITING, YOUR MAJESTIES," HE SAID, "AND I ASK NO REWARD. THE MEANING IS PLAIN, BUT WILL NOT BE AGREEABLE FOR YOU TO HEAR. I MERELY READ WHAT IS WRITTEN."

AS THEY APPEARED ON THE WALL, THE FOUR WORDS WERE: MNA, MNA, TKL, AND UPRSYN. IF THEY MEANT ANYTHING, THEY SEEMED TO BE THE NAMES OF UNITS OF MONEY IN COMMON USE: MINA, MINA, TEKEL (SHEKEL) AND PARSYN. BUT THAT READING SEEMED TO MAKE NO SORT OF SENSE.

(AUTHOR'S NOTE -- ARAMAIC, LIKE HEBREW, IS WRITTEN ONLY IN CONSONANTS. GREEK, ON THE CONTRARY, STARTING WITH THE SAME BASIC ALPHABET, HAS ADAPTED SOME OF THE CONSONANTS TO FORM VOWELS, SO THAT THE SOUND AND MEANING OF A WORD ARE MORE READILY KNOWN. IN ARAMAIC, AS IN HEBREW, ALL WORDS ARE MADE UP OF THREE ROOT LETTERS, THOUGH THE WORD MAY BE LONGER BECAUSE OF PREFIXES OR SUFFIXES. THE VOCALIZATION DEPENDS ON THE MEANING, AND THAT IS USUALLY APPARENT FROM THE CONTEXT. BUT WHEN A WORD STANDS ALONE, WITH NOTHING TO INDICATE WHAT IT IS ABOUT, THE MEANING MAY WELL BE UNCERTAIN.)

THE LETTER ALEPH, WHICH EVENTUALLY BECAME GREEK ALPHA, AND OUR A, WAS ORIGINALLY A CONSONANT, AS WERE ALSO THE U AND THE Y IN THE WORDS WRITTEN. IN THE LAST WORD THE U IS THE CONJUNCTION AND, THE IN THE NORMAL PLURAL ENDING.

THE ROOT MNA MEANS TO COUNT, HENCE THE LARGEST MONETARY UNIT WAS THE MINA, THE COUNT. THE ROOT TKL MEANS TO WEIGH, A TEKEL (HEBREW SHEKEL) WAS A WEIGHT. THE ROOT PRS MEANS TO DIVIDE, HENCE SMALL COINS WERE CALLED PARSYN, "DIVIDE MONEY", IN CHARGE, AS WE SHOULD SAY. AN ADDITIONAL MEANING IS DUE TO THE FACT THAT PARSYN WAS THE NAME OF THE PERSIANS.)

INSTEAD OF READING THE WORDS AS NOUNS, DANIEL READ THEM AS VERBS. HIS BE RANG OUT THROUGH THE GREAT HALL: "COUNTED! COUNTED! WEIGHED! DIVIDED! YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED; YOU ARE COUNTED OUT! YOU ARE WEIGHED AND FOUND WANTING! YOUR KINGDOM IS DIVIDED, AND GIVEN TO THE MELES AND PERSIANS!"

BELSHAZZAR GAVE A SHRIEK OF DISMAY, AND FELL FORWARD OVER THE TABLE. NITOCRIS SCREAMED. AND JUST THEN A SHOUT WAS HEARD IN THE STREET, "PARSYN! PARSYN!"

"THE PERSIANS HAVE COME!" EVERYBODY BEGAN TO SCREAM. THE BANQUET BROKE UP IN A WILD CONFUSION.

IN THE MEANTIME, I HAD BEEN WAITING AT THE GATE FOR THE ARRIVAL OF THE PERSIANS. A SIGNAL WAS GIVEN, THE GUARDS QUIETLY OPENED THE SMALL GATE, AND MEN CAME MARCHING IN, IN PERFECT SILENCE. AFTER ABOUT A HUNDRED HAD PASSED US, A TROOP OF HORSEMEN CAME THROUGH THE GATE, THE HORSES' FEET PADDED TO AVOID NOISE. THEY WENT GALLOPPING SILENTLY IN THE DIRECTION OF THE GREAT SUNSET GATE, AT WHICH THE MAIN BODY OF THE PERSIAN ARMY STOOD READY TO ENTER.

THEY ENCOUNTERED LITTLE RESISTANCE. THE OFFICERS AND MEN OF THE AKKADIAN ARMY, KNOWING THAT RESISTANCE WAS FUTILE, SURRENDERED QUICKLY. IN THE FEW POCKETS OF RESISTANCE A FEW MEN WERE KILLED, INCLUDING SOME WHO WERE JUST FLEEING FROM THE BANQUET. BELSHAZZAR HIMSELF WAS DEAD BY DAYLIGHT. THE WHOLE CITY WAS COMPLETELY UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE INVADING FORCES.

IN THE PALACE, NITOCRIS WAS FOUND DEAD, A DAGGER IN HER HEART. WHETHER IT WAS SUICIDE OR MURDER WE NEVER KNEW.

"WHO DID THE WRITING?" I ASKED. DANIEL, WHEN HE RELATED THE OCCURRENCE TO ME. HE ONLY WINKED AT ME AND MADE NO REPLY.

THE NEW EMPIRE

CYRUS HAD A REMARKABLY EFFICIENT ORGANIZATION. IN A SHORT TIME ORDER WAS RESTORED IN THE CITY. A PROCLAMATION WAS ISSUED, AND PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT MADE, THAT THERE WOULD BE NO CONFISCATION OF PROPERTY, THAT BABEL AND THE WHOLE FORMER AKKADIAN EMPIRE WERE NOW INTEGRAL PARTS OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE, AND THAT CITIZENS OF THE FORMER EMPIRE HAD FULL RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE NEW EMPIRE. ANNOUNCEMENTS WOULD BE MADE SHORTLY CONCERNING THE NEW SCHEDULE OF TAXATION, BUT IT WAS BROADLY HINTED THAT TAXES WOULD BE LOWER THAN BEFORE. MINOR OFFICIALS MIGHT CONTINUE TO EXERCISE THEIR DUTIES UNLESS OR UNTIL THEY WERE REMOVED BY ROYAL ORDER. ARMY UNITS WERE GIVEN THE OPTION OF BEING INCORPORATED INTO THE PERSIAN ARMY, AND MOST OF THEM ACCEPTED THE OFFER. ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, IT LOOKED LIKE EVERYONE EXCEPT THE HIGHLY PRIVILEGED CLASSES WOULD BE BETTER OFF UNDER THE NEW SYSTEM.

AS SOON AS THINGS WERE CALM ENOUGH THAT I CONSIDERED IT EXPEDIENT REQUESTED AN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING. HE SET ME A TIME IN LATE AFTERNOON. I KNEW THAT HE HAD BEEN HAVING AUDIENCE ALL DAY, AND MUST BE EXHAUSTED. BUT HE HAD SET THE TIME, AND OF COURSE I MUST COMPLY.

CYRUS RECEIVED ME INFORMALLY. HE CALLED FOR A SERVANT TO BRING WINE, THREW OFF HIS ROYAL ROBES, AND RELAXED. IT MADE ME THINK OF THE CONFERENCES WE HAD HAD LONG AGO IN EODATANA.

"OH, WHAT A DAY!" HE SAID. "EVERYBODY WANTS EVERYTHING, AND THEY DON'T WANT IT TOMORROW, THEY WANT IT TODAY — OR LAST WEEK! I NEED SOMEBODY WHO KNOWS HIS WAY AROUND WITH THESE PEOPLE, AND CAN TAKE SOME OF THE LOAD OFF ME. DO YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS?"

"I KNOW A MAN — HE IS EIGHTY-THREE AND RETIRED, BUT STILL VIGOROUS, AND HE HAS BEEN IN THIS GOVERNMENT ALL HIS LIFE. HE KNOWS WHO MAY BE TRUSTED, IF ANYBODY DOES. HE IS TOO OLD TO BE AMBITIOUS, BUT I FEEL SURE HE WOULD BE WILLING TO SERVE YOU FOR A FEW YEARS, WHILE YOU GET THINGS STRAIGHTENED OUT. HIS NAME IS DANIEL. BY THE WAY, IT WAS HIS SON WHO WROTE THE POEM ABOUT YOU THAT I SHOWED YOU."

"WAS IT? THAT SPEAKS WELL FOR HIM. I'M SURPRISED HE DIDN'T LOSE HIS HEAD FOR WRITING THINGS LIKE THAT."

"HE DID LOSE IT," I SAID SADLY. "OUR PEOPLE HONOR HIM GREATLY."

"WELL, YOU KEPT YOUR PROMISE — ABOUT OPENING THE GATES," CYRUS SAID. "THAT REALLY MADE A GREAT DIFFERENCE IN MY PLANS. AND NOW I AM READY TO KEEP MINE."

THAT WAS GOOD NEWS, BUT IT DID NOT REALLY SURPRISE ME. I ALREADY FELT SURE THAT CYRUS WOULD TAKE THAT ATTITUDE.

"WHEN DO YOU THINK YOUR PEOPLE WOULD BE READY TO GO?" CYRUS ASKED.

"NOT THIS YEAR, CERTAINLY, AND I DOUBT THAT WE COULD BE READY NEXT YEAR. PERHAPS BY THE YEAR AFTER THAT WE MIGHT BE READY TO TRY IT. IT IS GOING TO TAKE A LOT OF WORK TO PERSUADE OUR PEOPLE TO UNDERTAKE THIS PROJECT. YOU SEE, IT IS ALMOST SIXTY YEARS SINCE THE BULK OF OUR PEOPLE CAME OVER HERE, AND THERE ARE PRECIOUS FEW LEFT WHO EVEN REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT THE FORMER LIFE. WE ARE SETTLED HERE, AND IT WILL NOT BE EASY FOR US TO PULL UP STAKES AND SET OUT ON A LONG, DIFFICULT JOURNEY, TO A SITUATION THAT WILL BE DIFFICULT AT BEST. BUT I BELIEVE WE CAN DO IT."

"HOW MANY DO YOU THINK MIGHT GO?"

"IT IS HARD TO TELL. UNLESS WE COULD HAVE AS MANY AS TEN THOUSAND I DON'T SEE HOW WE COULD TRY IT AT ALL. I HOPE WE CAN HAVE THREE OR FOUR TIMES THAT MANY."

"DO YOU PLAN TO GO YOURSELF?"

"UNLESS MY HEALTH SHOULD FAIL BEFORE TIME TO START I PLAN TO GO."

"WHO WOULD BE YOUR LEADER?"

"WE HAD A MAN DESIGNATED AS LEADER," I SAID, "SHEALTIEL, THE SON OF OUR LATE KING. HE WAS A GENERAL IN THE ARMY OF AKKAD, BUT UNFORTUNATELY HE WAS KILLED IN THE LAST BATTLE. BUT HIS SON, ZERUDBABEL, IS AN OFFICER, AND I AM SURE HE WILL BE CHOSEN AS OUR LEADER. HE WAS THE ONE RESPONSIBLE FOR OPENING THE GATES. OUR RELIGIOUS LEADER IS THE HIGH PRIEST. IT IS A HEREDITARY OFFICE. MY GRANDFATHER WAS HIGH PRIEST, MY FATHER WOULD HAVE BEEN IF POLITICAL UNDERHAND WORK HAD NOT DEPRIVED HIM OF THE OFFICE. I AM TOO OLD, BUT MY SON YESHUA WILL BE HIGH PRIEST."

"WE WILL HAVE TO HAVE SOME SORT OF POLITICAL ORGANIZATION," CYRUS SAID. "I DON'T THINK IT WOULD BE PROPER TO SET UP A KINGDOM. PERHAPS I CAN APPOINT YOUR MAN ZERUDBABEL AS GOVERNOR OF THE PROVINCE, SOMETHING LIKE THAT."

"ANY ARRANGEMENT YOU SEE FIT TO MAKE WILL BE SATISFACTORY WITH US," I SAID. "WE SHALL BE SO HAPPY TO BE IN OUR OWN COUNTRY AGAIN THAT WE SHALL CERTAINLY NOT WANT TO QUIBBLE OVER TERMS."

"VERY GOOD," SAID THE KING. "I SEE YOU HAVE BEEN MAKING SOME PLANS. HOW LONG HAVE YOUR PEOPLE BEEN PLANNING FOR THIS?"

"EVER SINCE WE HAVE BEEN HERE, REALLY," I SAID. "BUT FOR A LONG TIME NO DEFINITE PLANS COULD BE MADE BECAUSE IT LOOKED IMPOSSIBLE. AT THE TIME THE FIRST LARGE GROUP WERE BROUGHT HERE, A PROPHET IN JERUSALEM ADVISED, 'SETTLE DOWN AND MAKE YOUR HOME IN THAT LAND, AND BE LOYAL TO ITS GOVERNMENT. FOR YAHWEH OUR GOD SAYS, 'AFTER SEVENTY YEARS I WILL BRING YOU BACK.' COUNTING FROM THE YEAR THAT FIRST GROUP OF EXILES CAME, THE SEVENTY YEARS WILL BE UP IN THREE MORE YEARS. THAT IS WHY I THINK WE SHOULD MAKE OUR RETURN JOURNEY THREE YEARS FROM NOW. IT WILL BE A DIFFICULT UNDERTAKING, BUT WE BELIEVE WE CAN DO IT, WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD -- AND WITH YOUR HELP, FOR WHICH WE ARE PROFOUNDLY GRATEFUL."

"PROPHECY IS A STRANGE THING," THE KING SAID THOUGHTFULLY. "THE ROMANS CAN NEVER EXPLAIN IT. BUT WHAT ABOUT THIS OTHER PROPHET -- THE ONE WHO WROTE THE POEM ABOUT ME?"

"HE TOO HAS WRITTEN NUMBERLESS POEMS IN WHICH HE SAYS THAT YAHWEH OUR GOD WILL CERTAINLY BRING US BACK TO OUR OWN LAND IN SAFETY."

"REMARKABLE! AND ALL YOUR PEOPLE BELIEVE THESE PROPHECIES?"

"SOME OF US BELIEVE, SOME ARE DOUBTFUL. SOME MUST BE PERSUADED."

"WELL, I AM WITH YOU. TOMORROW I SHALL ISSUE A PROCLAMATION, PROMISING ALL NEEDED ASSISTANCE TO YOUR PEOPLE IN THIS. FROM WHAT I HEAR, THINGS ARE IN A PRETTY BADLY DISORGANIZED STATE OVER IN THAT AREA, BUT YOU CAN COUNT ON FULL COOPERATION FROM MY GOVERNMENT. AND I WISH YOU MUCH SUCCESS. THINGS ARE DISORGANIZED YET, BUT WE HAVE SOME MEN OVER THERE."

"WE SHALL ALWAYS BE GRATEFUL TO YOUR MAJESTY," I SAID, TURNING TO GO, "AND TO YAHWEH, OUR GOD."

"AND SEND YOUR MAN DANIEL TO ME," THE KING SAID AS I LEFT. "I THINK I CAN MAKE USE OF HIM."

A HIGHWAY IN THE DESERT

THE PROCLAMATION WAS DULY ISSUED. OUR PEOPLE HAILED IT WITH DELIGHT. MANY SCRIBES WERE PUT TO WORK MAKING COPIES OF IT, TO BE TAKEN TO ALL PARTS OF THE LAND, WHEREVER ANY OF OUR PEOPLE LIVED. THESE COPIES WERE WRITTEN IN ARAMAIC, THE LANGUAGE MOST GENERALLY UNDERSTOOD IN THE WHOLE AREA. IN FACT, OUR PEOPLE, THOUGH WE PRIZED OUR HEBREW TONGUE, WERE COMING MORE AND MORE TO SPEAK ARAMAIC; MANY OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE COULD SCARCELY SPEAK HEBREW AT ALL. AFTER ALL, THE TWO LANGUAGES ARE VERY SIMILAR. MANY OF THE ROOT WORDS ARE THE SAME, THOUGH THE INFLECTION IS DIFFERENT. I COULD FORESEE THAT ARAMAIC WOULD EVENTUALLY BECOME THE COMMON LANGUAGE OF THE WHOLE REGION. AND KNOWING AS I DID THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF THE GREEK LANGUAGE, I HAD AN IDEA THAT GREEK MIGHT FINALLY DISPLACE ARAMAIC AS THE WORLD LANGUAGE.

OUR PEOPLE HAD MULTIPLIED DURING THESE YEARS, AND HAD SPREAD ALL OVER THE COUNTRY. THERE WAS HARDLY A CITY OF ANY SIZE IN ALL THE LAND OF SHINAR WHERE THERE WAS NOT A COLONY OF THE EXILES OF JUDAH. TO BE SURE, THERE WERE REMNANTS OF OTHER TRIBES AMONG THEM, BUT THE TRIBE OF JUDAH WAS PREPONDERANT, SO THAT ANY OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WERE REFERRED TO AS JUDAHITES, -- THE TERM "JEW" WAS BEGINNING TO BE USED OF US.

AS OUR PEOPLE RECEIVED THE PROCLAMATION GIVING US THE RIGHT TO RETURN TO OUR OWN LAND WITH THE PROMISE OF ASSISTANCE BY THE GOVERNMENT, MANY WERE WILD WITH ENTHUSIASM, AND WANTED TO SET OUT AT ONCE. BUT AS SOONER SECOND THOUGHT TOOK OVER, IT BECAME APPARENT THAT THIS WAS NO SIMPLE MATTER. MORE WAS NEEDED THAN ENTHUSIASM.

"WHAT ABOUT MY BUSINESS?" A MERCHANT SAID TO ME. "I HAVE A GOOD BUSINESS GOING, I CAN'T JUST ABANDON IT AND GO TRAIPSING OFF TO JERUSALEM. WHERE IS JERUSALEM, ANYWAY? I'VE HEARD MY PARENTS TALK ABOUT IT, BUT I HAVE NO IDEA HOW FAR IT IS, OR WHICH WAY TO START, AND WHAT WILL WE DO WHEN WE GET THERE -- IF WE EVER DO? IS THERE ANYTHING AT ALL LEFT OF THE CITY? IS ANYBODY LIVING THERE? IT LOOKS CRAZY TO ME, TO BE MARCHING OFF INTO THE WILDERNESS, WITHOUT KNOWING ANYTHING ABOUT IT. LIKE AS NOT WE SHOULD ALL DIE IN THE DESERT OF HUNGER AND THIRST, OR BE EATEN BY SNAKES, OR DEVoured BY LIONS. I THINK YOU HAD BETTER COUNT ME OUT."

I TOLD HIM WE SHOULD TRUST IN YAHWEH. HE MERELY SHRUGGED. I QUOTED TO HIM SOME OF ISAIAH'S POEM, "MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD. EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE FILLED IN, EVERY MOUNTAIN CUT DOWN, THE CROOKED PLACES MADE STRAIGHT, THE ROUGH PLACES SMOOTH." HE LAUGHED, AND SAID, "I'LL BELIEVE THAT WHEN I SEE IT."

OF COURSE THE MAN WAS PARTLY RIGHT. I COULD SEE HIS POINT OF VIEW. STILL, I BELIEVED THAT GOD HAD PROMISED THIS THING, AND THAT WE COULD DO IT. BUT OBVIOUSLY IT WAS GOING TO TAKE SOME PLANNING.

WE GATHERED TOGETHER AS MANY OF THE ELDERS OF OUR PEOPLE AS WE COULD, IN CHEDAR, WHERE THERE WAS THE LARGEST CONCENTRATION OF ISRAELITES. WE TALKED OVER THE SITUATION. DANIEL WAS WITH US, AND ZERUBBABEL, AND OTHER PROMINENT MEN FROM THE CAPITAL. WE FACED FRANKLY THE DIFFICULTIES INVOLVED. ISAIAH'S POEM WAS VERY FINE. BUT, HIGHLY AS WE REVERENCED HIM, WE COULD NOT EXPECT THE LANDSCAPE TO BE COMPLETELY CHANGED IN OUR FAVOR.

PLAINLY IT WAS TOO LATE TO ATTEMPT ANYTHING THAT YEAR. BY THE TIME WE COULD GET THE ELDERS TOGETHER, MIDSUMMER WAS UPON US.

"SOMEBODY OUGHT TO GO NEXT YEAR, AND SCOUT OUT THE PLACE," ZERUBBABEL SAID. "I THINK THE KING WOULD RELEASE ME FROM MY MILITARY DUTIES FOR THAT. I COULD GO, WITH TWENTY OR THIRTY MEN MOUNTED ON CAMELS, WE COULD SEE WHAT THINGS ARE LIKE OVER THERE, AND DECIDE ON OUR ROUTE. IT IS NO JOKE, GETTING OUT ON A JOURNEY LIKE THAT, WITH THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, WOMEN AND CHILDREN INCLUDED. WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT WE ARE DOING."

WE ALL AGREED WITH HIM. WE DECIDED THAT IF WE COULD GET OUR PEOPLE ON THE ROAD EARLY IN THE SPRING OF THE THIRD YEAR WE SHOULD BE DOING WELL.

THE KING GLADLY GAVE CONSENT, AND EARLY THE NEXT SPRING ZERUBBABEL SET OUT WITH TWENTY-FOUR MEN, WELL ARMED, RIDING ON CAMELS. DURING THE SUMMER I WENT TO MANY PLACES, MEETING PEOPLE, TRYING TO GENERATE ENTHUSIASM FOR THE RETURN. I TOLD EVERYBODY THAT THE DATE WAS DEFINITELY SET, TO ASSEMBLE BEFORE THE PASSOVER FEAST, TWO YEARS FROM THE ONE JUST PAST, AND BE PREPARED TO START THE JOURNEY IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE FEAST. THE ASSEMBLY PLACE WAS A SITE SELECTED NEAR THE RIVER AHAVA. I URGED PEOPLE TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS TO SELL ANY LAND THAT THEY POSSESSED, AND ANYTHING ELSE THAT COULD NOT BE TAKEN ON SUCH A JOURNEY, AND TO EQUIP THEMSELVES WITH ALL NECESSARY TOOLS.

MANY PEOPLE WERE HESITANT, FEARFUL OF MAKING A CHANGE. SOME WERE TOO OLD, OR HAD OTHER PHYSICAL INFIRMITIES. AS I TALKED WITH THEM, THEIR FACES WOULD LIGHT UP WITH ENTHUSIASM, THEN, SADLY, THEY WOULD ACCEPT THE FACT THAT NOT ALL OF US COULD GO. BUT MOST OF THEM OFFERED TO CONTRIBUTE MONEY, OR GOODS TO HELP THE OTHERS.

DANIEL SAID, "MUCH TO MY SORROW, I AM GOING TO HAVE TO STAY HERE. I DON'T THINK I AM STILL FIT, BUT TAMAR COULD NOT STAND SUCH A TRIP, AND I COULD NOT THINK OF LEAVING HER. BESIDES, I AM DOING AN IMPORTANT WORK IN THE GOVERNMENT HERE, WHICH WILL BE USEFUL IN FURTHERING OUR PROJECT. ZECHARIAH WILL GO, OF COURSE, AND HIS FAMILY, AND ALL MY GRANDCHILDREN. BUT RUTH FEELS THAT SHE SHOULD STAY WITH HER MOTHER."

ZERUBBABEL AND HIS MEN RETURNED IN LATE FALL. WE CALLED A MEETING OF THE ELDERS TO HEAR THEIR REPORT.

"WE HAD A VERY GOOD TRIIP," ZERUBBABEL SAID. "WE RECEIVED LETTERS BEARING THE ROYAL SEAL, TO THE GOVERNORS OF THE PROVINCES, IN HURAN, DAMASCUS, SAMARIA AND TYRE. WE TOLD EVERYBODY THAT OUR WHOLE NATION WOULD BE COMING BACK YEAR AFTER NEXT, TO REBUILD JERUSALEM. SOME OF THEM WERE NOT HAPPY ABOUT IT, ESPECIALLY THE LEADERS IN SAMARIA. BUT WE SERVED NOTICE ON THEM THAT THE KING HAD GIVEN THESE ORDERS, THAT THEY WERE REQUIRED TO COOPERATE, AND THEY PROMISED TO DO SO — WITH TONGUE IN CHEEK. I'M AFRAID."

"WHAT WAS JERUSALEM LIKE?" THE ELDERS COULD NOT WAIT TO ASK THIS.

"THE WHOLE COUNTRY IS VERY SPARSELY INHABITED. THERE ARE A FEW LITTLE MISERABLE SETTLEMENTS, NOT WORTHY TO BE CALLED TOWNS. THERE ARE A GOOD MANY SQUATTERS ON THE LAND — SHEPHERDS, MOSTLY. SOME OF THEM CLAIM TO BE ISRAELITES, I WAS TOLD, BUT MOST OF THEM ARE FROM HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE. AND THEY ARE NOT GOING TO LIKE THE IDEA OF BEING DISPOSSESSED. AND JERUSALEM ITSELF — YOU CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT A MESS IT IS. NEBUCHADREZZAR'S ORDERS, I AM TOLD, WERE NOT TO LEAVE ONE STONE ON ANOTHER, AND THEY WERE ALMOST LITERALLY CARRIED OUT. NO WALLS AT ALL, OF COURSE, AND NOTHING THAT YOU COULD CALL A BUILDING. A FEW RUDE SHELTERS HAVE BEEN RIGGED UP, AND SOME MISERABLE PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO LIVE IN THEM. BUT IT IS TRULY A DESOLATION."

"WHAT ABOUT ANIMALS?"

"THE PLACE IS OVERRUN WITH RATS, AND WHEREVER YOU FIND FATE YOU CAN BE SURE THERE ARE SNAKES. I DIDN'T SEE ANY, BUT I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF THERE WERE WOLVES AND HYENAS MAKING THEIR DENS AMONG THE RUBBLE."

"IF WE GET OVER THERE, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO LIVE ON?" ASKED ONE ELDER.

"THERE'LL BE NOTHING TO EAT, NOWHERE TO BUY FOOD. WHAT CAN WE DO?"

"WE'LL HAVE TO CLEAR THE LAND AND PLANT GRAIN," ZERUBBABEL SAID. "MOST OF THE FIELDS ARE GROWN UP IN THORNY SCRUB. SOME OF THE OLD OLIVE GROVES ARE STILL STANDING, AND A FEW VINEYARDS, TERRIBLY NEGLECTED. BUT WE CAN GET PLANTING STOCK FROM THEM, I HOPE. I WENT TO JOPPA, AND MADE ARRANGEMENTS WITH SOME MERCHANTS THERE TO IMPORT GRAIN FROM EGYPT, AND HAVE READY TO SELL TO US THE FIRST YEAR AND THE SECOND, MAYBE EVEN THE THIRD. BUT AFTER THAT WE SHALL BE ON OUR OWN — THE KING CAN'T BE EXPECTED TO SUPPORT US FOR EVER."

"AND WE'LL HAVE TO START BUILDING HOUSES," AN ELDER SAID.

"AT LEAST THERE OUGHT TO BE PLENTY OF STONE," ANOTHER OFFERED.

"THE RUINS WILL HAVE TO BE CLEARED AWAY BEFORE WE CAN START BUILDING ANYTHING," WAS ANOTHER COMMENT.

"AND WE'LL HAVE TO BUILD A TEMPLE," IT WAS YESHUA WHO SAID THAT.

"YES, WE'LL HAVE TO BUILD A TEMPLE," WE ALL AGREED.

ALL THE NEXT YEAR WE WERE IN A FRENZY OF PREPARATION. COMMITTEES WERE SENT TO EVERY TOWN AND CITY WHERE ISRAELITES LIVED. EVERY KENOSRET WAS VISITED, THOSE WHO RESOLVED TO GO WERE LISTED. PEOPLE MADE ARRANGEMENTS TO DISPOSE OF ALL THEIR PROPERTY THAT COULD NOT BE TAKEN.

OF COURSE THERE WERE MANY WHO COULD NOT MAKE THE JOURNEY, BECAUSE OF AGE OR INFIRMITY, OR BECAUSE OF INVOLVEMENT WITH BUSINESS AFFAIRS THEY COULD NOT LEAVE. THESE CONTRIBUTED MONEY, SOME GENEROUSLY, SOME MEASURLY, BUT A SIZEABLE SUM WAS ACCUMULATED IN THIS WAY.

CYRUS THE KING WAS AS GOOD AS HIS WORD — BETTER THAN HIS WORD. WITH THE HELP OF DANIEL AND OTHERS HE WAS ABLE TO IDENTIFY MANY OF THE SACRED VESSELS TAKEN FROM JERUSALEM. THESE WERE LISTED, AND TURNED OVER TO RESPONSIBLE MEN WHO COULD BE TRUSTED TO KEEP THEM SECURELY, AND MAKE CERTAIN THAT THEY WERE SAFELY DELIVERED TO THEIR FUTURE HOME.

"I TOLD YOU MY PROMISES WERE NOT KEPT BY FALSES," CYRUS SAID TO ME AS HE SAW THE GOLD AND SILVER VESSELS DELIVERED. TRULY THEY WERE NOT. AT THE TIME I MADE THE AGREEMENT WITH CYRUS I HAD NOT DARED TO ASK FOR THE RETURN OF THESE VESSELS.

WE CELEBRATED THE PASSOVER WHEN ALL OUR THOUSANDS WERE ASSEMBLED, READY TO SET OUT ON THE LONG, DIFFICULT JOURNEY. AND THIS TIME, THE WATCHWORD, "NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM" WAS UTTERED WITH REAL FERVOR. WE WERE FACING SERIOUS PROBLEMS, BUT WE FELT CONFIDENT THAT OUR GOD WOULD BRING US SAFELY THROUGH THEM ALL. "FOR SEVENTY YEARS I WILL BRING YOU BACK," JEREMIAH HAD PROCLAIMED IN YAHVEH'S NAME. IT HAD BEEN JUST SEVENTY YEARS SINCE THE FIRST GROUP OF HOSTAGES, OF WHICH DANIEL WAS ONE, HAD BEEN BROUGHT TO BABYLON IN THE FIRST YEARS OF NABUCHADREZZAR'S REIGN. THIS FACT GAVE US CONFIDENCE.

THE FINAL LISTING SHOWED THE NAMES OF 12,760 READY TO START THE GREAT MIGRATION, BESIDES MORE THAN SEVEN THOUSAND MALE AND FEMALE SLAVES, WHO WOULD EVENTUALLY BE INCORPORATED INTO THE COMMUNITY OF ISRAEL, BRINGING THE TOTAL ABOVE FIFTY THOUSAND. WITH MANY ANIMALS, IT WAS A FORMIDABLE ARRAY.

ISAIAH HAD PROMISED A HIGHWAY IN THE DESERT, RIVERS, SPRINGS, POOLS, GREEN TREES. (AND HOW WE WISHED THAT HE COULD HAVE LIVED TO MAKE THE JOURNEY WITH US!) THAT, OF COURSE, WAS POETIC EXAGGERATION, BUT IN FACT THERE WAS AN UNPRECEDENTED AMOUNT OF RAIN THAT YEAR, MORE THAN HAD EVER BEEN RECORDED BEFORE. THERE WAS ABUNDANT FORAGE FOR THE ANIMALS, WATER ENOUGH FOR ALL, AND OUR SUPPLIES OF FOOD HELD OUT REMARKABLY WELL -- ALMOST MIRACULOUSLY WELL, WE THOUGHT. DAY AFTER DAY WE MARCHED. WE MADE UP SONGS AND SANG THEM, SONGS ABOUT THE HIGHWAYS TO ZION.

WE CAME AT LAST TO THE HEADWATERS OF THE YARMUK, THEN DOWN THROUGH GILEAD AND BASHAN, CROSSING THE JABBOK AT THE SAME PLACE WHERE OUR ANCESTOR JACOB HAD WRESTLED WITH A MYSTERIOUS PRESENCE SO MANY CENTURIES AGO. WE WERE REMINDED OF GOD'S ELECTING LOVE, CHOOSING JACOB, CHOOSING THE NATION OF ISRAEL, REVEALING ITSELF THROUGH THE WORDS OF THE PROPHECY, AND NOW, OUR PUNISHMENT FOR SIN AND REBELLION COMPLETED, BRINGING US BACK AGAIN.

FIFTY THOUSAND OF US! OUR NATION HAD BEEN NUMBERS IN THE MILLIONS, FIFTY THOUSAND SEEMED A SMALL NUMBER, BUT AFTER ALL, AS ISAIAH HAD REMINDED US, OUR FATHER ABRAHAM WAS ONLY ONE WHEN GOD HAD CHOSEN HIM.

AND NOW WE WERE COMING HOME! WE FORDEED THE JORDAN, AND BEGAN TO ASCEND THE HEIGHTS OF JUDAH. WE CAME TO THE REMAINS OF TOWNS OF WHICH WE CAREFULLY REMEMBERED THE NAMES. AT LAST, AS THOSE OF US IN THE FRONT OF THE COLUMN REACHED A HEIGHT OF LAND, WE SAW IN THE DISTANCE WHAT MUST INDEED BE THE RUINS OF JERUSALEM. WE GAVE A SHOUT OF TRIUMPH, WHICH WAS ECHOED BACK ALONG THE LINE OF WEARY MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN AND ANIMALS.

"HALLELU-JAH! YAHWEH HAS BROUGHT US HOME!"

"THEY THAT SOW IN TEARS SHALL REAP IN JOY"

THE REPORT THAT ZERUBBABEL HAD BROUGHT OF THE CHAOS IN JERUSALEM, THOUGH VIVID, HAD STILL LEFT US UNPREPARED FOR THE LESLATION THAT MET OUR EYES WHEN WE ENTERED WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN OUR CAPITAL CITY. THE OLD PEOPLE AMONG US, WHO COULD REMEMBER THE CITY AS IT HAD BEEN FIFTY YEARS BEFORE, WENT TO SEE THE RUINS.

BUT WE WERE NOT LEFT WEeping LONG. ZERUBBABEL TOOK CHARGE, AND BEGAN ISSUING ORDERS. HE APPOINTED OFFICERS TO HAVE OVERSIGHT OF THE VARIOUS GROUPS. NOT ALL OF US CLAIMED JERUSALEM AS OUR ANCESTRAL HOME. SOME WERE FROM BETHLEHEM, SOME FROM ANATHOTH, SOME FROM LACHISH, SOME FROM TEKOA, AND SO ON. BUT THE BULK OF US WERE FROM JERUSALEM. THOSE FROM OTHER TOWNS WERE SENT TO FIND THEIR PLACE, AND BEGIN WORK THERE, UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE OFFICERS APPOINTED. AND THE CITY OF JERUSALEM WAS DIVIDED INTO DISTRICTS AND SUB-DISTRICTS, WITH OFFICERS IN CHARGE OF THE VARIOUS GROUPS.

ON THE JOURNEY WE HAD LIVED IN TENTS; AND UNTIL SOME SORT OF HOUSING COULD BE PROVIDED WE STILL PITCHED OUR TENTS. ZERUBBABEL'S MILITARY EXPERIENCE ENABLED HIM TO BRING ORDER OUT OF THE CONFUSION. THE PROBLEMS WERE ENDLESS; AND AS ANY TASK WAS BEGUN, IT WAS DISCOVERED THAT SOMETHING ELSE MUST BE DONE BEFORE THAT COULD BE STARTED.

THERE WERE A GOOD MANY MASONS AMONG OUR PEOPLE, NOT NEARLY ENOUGH; AND THE MASONS HAD BEEN ACCUSTOMED, IN BETHLEHEM, TO WORK WITH BRICK. HERE STONE WAS THE MATERIAL. STONE THERE WAS IN PLENTY; IT LAY PILED EVERYWHERE. BUT MUCH OF IT WAS NOT THE RIGHT SIZE AND SHAPE FOR THE TASK AT HAND, AND STONE IS DIFFICULT TO BREAK.

WE NEEDED MORTAR, ALSO. SOME MEN WERE SET TO WORK QUARRYING LIMESTONE AND SETTING UP KILNS FOR BURNING IT INTO LIME. SAND HAD TO BE PROCURED WHEREVER IT COULD BE FOUND; TIMBER ALSO. FOOD WAS AN URGENT NECESSITY. MEN HAD TO BE SENT WITH PACK ANIMALS TO JOPPA, TO BUY THE WHEAT THAT WE HOPED WOULD BE THERE, AS CONTRACTED FOR. THERE WAS WHEAT, BUT NOT IN THE QUANTITY NEEDED, AND THE PRICE WAS HIGH. IN SAMARIA WE WERE ABLE TO GET A LITTLE, BUT THE SUPPLY WAS STILL FAR LESS THAN WE NEEDED, AND IT HAD TO BE RATIONED CAREFULLY. STORAGE BINS HAD TO BE PREPARED, WHERE IT COULD BE KEPT SAFE. AND ALTHOUGH OUR SUPPLY WAS MEAGER, SOME OF THE WHEAT AND OTHER GRAIN MUST BE SET APART FOR SEED. WE HAD TO THINK OF THE FUTURE; NEXT YEAR IT MIGHT BE EVEN HARDER TO BUY ENOUGH GRAIN. EVERY PLOT OF GROUND THAT COULD BE CLEARED MUST BE PLOWED AND PLANTED. THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN HELPED A GREAT DEAL AT THAT WORK.

"SEED, PRECIOUS SEED" THE OFFICERS SAID AS THEY SOLED OUT THE GRAIN FOR PLANTING. "DON'T WASTE A GRAIN OF IT. IT IS PRECIOUS. FIG TREES AND VINES MUST BE PLANTED ALSO, AND OLIVE SEEDLINGS. IT WOULD BE YEARS BEFORE THESE CAME INTO BEARING, BUT EVERY SEASON WAS IMPORTANT, EVERY SEEDLING OR CUTTING PLANTED THE FIRST YEAR WAS A STEP TOWARD BETTER THINGS IN THE FUTURE.

"THEY THAT SOW IN TEARS SHALL REAP IN JOY." WE MADE A SONG ABOUT IT, AND SANG IT AS WE SOWED THE GRAIN THAT WE WOULD SO MUCH LIKE TO USE FOR PRESENT NEEDS. "HE WHO GOES OUT WEeping, BEARING PRECIOUS SEED, WILL SURELY BRING IN THE SHEAVES WITH SHOUTS OF JOY."

BARNs AND SHEEPFOLDS HAD TO BE ERECTED, TO PROTECT OUR FEW ANIMALS FROM WOLVES AND OTHER BEASTS, ESPECIALLY TWO-LEGGED WOLVES, AS WE CALLED THEM, OF WHICH THERE WERE MANY ROAMING THE COUNTRYSIDE. THERE WERE ALSO BANDS OF BEDOUINS FROM OVER JORDAN WHO CAME RAIDING, QUICK TO CARRY OFF WHATEVER COULD BE CARRIED, OR TO INFLECT WILLFUL DESTRUCTION.

BUT EVEN WITH ALL THIS HUSTLE AND BUSTLE, WE MUST NOT THINK ONLY OF OUR MATERIAL NEEDS. YESHUA CAME TO TALK TO ME ABOUT IT.

"NEXT MONTH IS THE TIME FOR THE FEAST OF BUCCHS," HE SAID. "I THINK WE SHOULD PLAN TO OBSERVE IT." I SPOKE TO ZERUDDABEL ABOUT IT. HE GROANED, AND SAID, "HOW CAN WE?" BUT I THINK WE MUST.

"YES," I AGREED, "WE HAVE BEEN SO UTTERLY DEPENDENT ON YAHWEH'S HELP IN THIS WHOLE BUSINESS, SURELY WE OUGHT TO PAUSE LONG ENOUGH TO EXPRESS OUR GRATITUDE FOR ALL HE HAS DONE FOR US."

ZERUDDABEL REALLY FELT THAT WAY TOO, IN SPITE OF ALL HIS GROANS. HE SENT MESSENGERS TO ALL THE OUTLYING TOWNS AND SETTLEMENTS, ANNOUNCING THE DATE, AND CALLING ALL THE PEOPLE TO ASSEMBLE AT JERUSALEM. THEY ALL CAME, TOO. I THINK ALL OF THEM FELT THAT IT WAS AN IMPORTANT OCCASION.

IT WAS NOT DIFFICULT TO IDENTIFY THE SITE OF THE TEMPLE, IN SPITE OF ALL THE DESTRUCTION. WE GOT A CREW TO CLEAR A SPACE LARGE ENOUGH THAT WE COULD ERECT AN ALTAR. WE CARRIED STONES IN OUR HANDS — I HELPED WITH THAT, MYSELF, THOUGH MY HANDS WERE UNACQUSTOMED TO SUCH WORK.

WE SET UP BUCCHS, TOO. THERE WAS NO LACK OF SCRUBBY GROWTH FROM WHICH THEY COULD BE MADE. THEY WERE NOT SO MUCH DIFFERENT FROM THE TENES WE WERE STILL LIVING IN, BUT THEY GAVE A FESTIVE AIR TO THE WHOLE THING, AND WE WERE HAPPY MAKING THEM.

AND AT THE PROPER TIME YESHUA PUT ON HIS PRIESTLY ROBES FOR THE SACRIFICE. THEY WERE NOT EXACTLY WHAT THE HIGH PRIEST'S ROBES SHOULD HAVE BEEN, BUT THEY WOULD SERVE UNTIL WE COULD DO BETTER.

THE FIRE WAS LIGHTED ON THE ALTAR, THE SACRIFICIAL FIRE. THE SMOKE ASCENDED TOWARD HEAVEN, AND WE ALL FELT PROFOUNDLY GRATEFUL FOR THE MERCY AND LOVE OF GOD. WE PLEDGED OURSELVES TO KEEP UP THE REGULAR CUSTOM OF SACRIFICES FROM THAT TIME ON.

"SOON WE MUST DO SOMETHING ABOUT A TEMPLE," WE ALL AGREED.

THE FIRST WINTER WAS A TRYING TIME INDEED, WITH SCANT FOOD, AND INADEQUATE HOUSING. BUT OUR VERY TRIALS BOUND US CLOSER TOGETHER AS A NATION. SPRING CAME AT LAST, AND SUMMER. THE HARVEST FROM OUR MEAGER SOWING WAS GOOD. IN ADDITION WE WERE ABLE TO BUY MORE IMPORTED GRAIN, AND MORE ANIMALS FOR BREEDING STOCK. WE KEPT THE FEAST OF BOOTHS THE SECOND YEAR WITH GREATER FERVOR, AND FACED THE WINTER WITH RENEWED CONFIDENCE.

WE CAME TO THE END OF THE SECOND FULL YEAR SINCE OUR RETURN TO JERUSALEM. THE PROGRESS THAT WE HAD MADE SEEMED PITIFULLY SMALL, AND THE PROBLEMS BEFORE US TREMENDOUS. BUT WE HAD MADE THE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEY, AND WE HAD SURVIVED TWO YEARS! AND WE FELT CONFIDENT THAT WITH GOD'S HELP WE SHOULD REALLY SUCCEED, AS WE MADE READY FOR OUR THIRD FEAST OF BOOTHS. YESHUA AND ZERUBBABEL CAME TO ME.

"I THINK IT IS TIME NOW TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE TEMPLE," YESHUA SAID. ZERUBBABEL NODDED HIS HEAD IN AGREEMENT.

"I THINK SO TOO," I SAID. "AND I THANK GOD THAT I HAVE LIVED TO SEE IT DONE. I AM IN MY SEVENTY-NINTH YEAR, AND IT IS NOT IN REASON THAT I SHOULD LIVE TO SEE THE WORK COMPLETED, BUT IF I CAN SEE A FOUNDATION LAID, I SHALL BE HAPPY."

"WE SHOULD CALL A MEETING OF THE ELDERS," SAID ZERUBBABEL, "AND FORM A PLAN. I THINK THE TIME TO DO IT IS IN CONNECTION WITH THE FEAST OF BOOTHS."

THE MEETING WAS CALLED, AND NOTWITHSTANDING THE FACT THAT ALL WERE EXCEEDINGLY BUSY WITH OTHER THINGS, MOST OF THE ELDERS WERE PRESENT.

SOME OF THE ELDERS THOUGHT WE OUGHT TO WAIT, ALLEGING THAT SCARCELY A BEGINNING HAD BEEN MADE ON THE TASK OF REBUILDING. WE STILL HAD NO CITY WALL, AND MANY FAMILIES WERE STILL WITHOUT HOUSING, AND THE HOUSES IN USE WERE STILL FAR FROM COMPLETE.

BUT YESHUA WAS ALL FOR BEGINNING. "YAHWEH HAS BLESSED OUR EFFORTS HITHERTO," HE SAID, "AND WE OUGHT TO HONOR HIM BY MAKING AT LEAST A START ON THE TEMPLE."

AFTER SOME DISCUSSION IT WAS AGREED THAT ON THE FINAL DAY OF THE FEAST WE SHOULD HAVE A SOLEMN ASSEMBLY, AND LAY THE FOUNDATIONS, IN HOPE AND FAITH.

THE DAY CAME, AND MANY THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WERE ASSEMBLED ON THE GROUND WHERE THE TEMPLE HAD STOOD, THE GROUND DEDICATED BY DAVID, THE TEMPLE BUILT BY SOLOMON, THE WONDER OF THE WORLD. DURING THE CENTURIES IT HAD OFTEN BEEN NEGLECTED AND ALLOWED TO FALL INTO DISREPAIR; BUT BY EARNEST AND FAITHFUL PEOPLE HAD BEEN RESTORED AND GIVEN A NEW SIGNIFICANCE IN THE LIFE OF THE NATION. IT HAD BEEN ABUSED, ALSO, AND MADE AN OBJECT OF SUPERSTITIOUS REVERENCE, EVEN OF IDOLATROUS WORSHIP. AND FOR THE SIN AND REBELLION OF THE NATION IT HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO SUFFER DESTRUCTION. YAHWEH HAD SPOKEN THE WORD THROUGH ISAIAH, THAT THE CITY SHOULD BE REBUILT, THE NATION RESTORED, THE TEMPLE BUILT AGAIN. AND HERE WE WERE, GATHERED FOR A SOLEMN OCCASION.

THE AREA HAD BEEN CLEARED OF RUBBLE, AND A MASTER BUILDER HAD MARKED OUT THE LINES FOR THE FOUNDATIONS. WITH ALL OUR FAITH AND HOPE, WE STILL HAD TO FACE HARD REALITIES; AND THE PLAN AGREED ON WOULD BE FAR INFERIOR TO THE MAGNIFICENCE OF SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. BUT IT WOULD BE A PLACE WHERE GOD'S PEOPLE COULD ACKNOWLEDGE HIM IN PUBLIC WORSHIP.

AT THE PROPER MOMENT YESHUA, IN HIS HIGH PRIESTLY ROBES, ASSISTED BY THE MASTER BUILDER, PLACED THE CORNER STONE, SAYING, "IN THE NAME OF YAHWEH TS'VAOTH I PLACE THIS STONE, THE BEGINNING OF A TEMPLE TO THE LIVING GOD."

THE RAMS' HORNS WERE SOUNDED, AND A GREAT SHOUT AROSE FROM ALL THE PEOPLE. IT WAS NOT AN UNMIXED SHOUT: THERE WERE GROANS OF JOY AND CRIES OF LAMENTATION FROM THE OLD PEOPLE PRESENT WHO COULD REMEMBER THE FORMER TEMPLE, AND MOURED ITS DESTRUCTION.

FOR ME, IT WAS A MOMENT OF PROFOUND EMOTION. I THOUGHT OF MY FATHER, AND OF THE FORTITUDE OF MY MOTHER AS SHE SAW HER HUSBAND, A SON AND A DAUGHTER, LEAVING HER TO CONFRONT GREAT DANGERS. I THOUGHT OF THE JOYOUS REUNION IN THE FAR COUNTRY, AND OF BOTH MY PARENTS, LONG SINCE LAID TO REST IN AN ALIEN SOIL. I HELD THE HAND OF MY DEAR WIFE AS TOGETHER WE REJOICED TO SEE OUR SON SERVING AS GOD'S HIGH PRIEST, HIS OWN SON STANDING BY, SOON TO BE INDUCTED INTO THE PRIESTHOOD.

I HAD COMPOSED A POEM FOR THE OCCASION, AND AT YESHUA'S REQUEST I NOW READ IT ALoud, THE PEOPLE STANDING IN REVERENT SILENCE. MY VOICE WAS STILL STRONG, THOUGH TWICE OR TWICE IT BROKE WITH EMOTIONS:

"WHEN YAHWEH RESTORED THE FORTUNES OF ZION
IT WAS LIKE A DREAM TO US.
THEN OUR MOUTH WAS FILLED WITH LAUGHTER,
OUR TONGUES GAVE FORTH SHOUTS OF JOY.
THEN IT WAS SAID AMONG THE NATIONS,
'YAHWEH HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR THEM.'
YAHWEH HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR US.
WE ARE GLAD."

AT THE PROPER MOMENT YAMNEN, WITH HIS HANDS RAISED IN A
THE MASTER BUILDERS, PLACED THE STONE IN THE PLACE
YAMNEN TOOK TO PLACE THE STONE IN THE PLACE
LIVING ROOM.

THE STONE, HOWEVER, WAS A LITTLE TOO SMALL FOR THE
PEOPLE. IT WAS NOT AN UNCOMMON OCCURRENCE THAT THE
OF LAMENTATION FROM THE STONE, AND THE STONE WAS
TENSE, AND MURDERED ITS OWNERS.

FOR ME, IT WAS A NIGHT OF THE MOST TERRIBLE
AND OF THE FORTITUDE OF THE STONE, A SON AND A
DAUGHTER, LEAVING ME.

REUNION IN THE FAY, THE STONE WAS A NIGHT OF
BEST IN AN ALICE, THE STONE WAS A NIGHT OF
REJOICED TO SEE THE STONE, AND THE STONE WAS
ING BY, SOON TO BE A NIGHT OF THE STONE.

I HAD CONSIDERED A NIGHT FOR THE STONE, AND THE STONE
NOW READ IT ALONE, THE STONE WAS A NIGHT OF
WAS STILL STANDING, THE STONE WAS A NIGHT OF

WHEN YAMNEN, WITH HIS HANDS RAISED IN A
IT WAS A NIGHT OF THE STONE, AND THE STONE
THEN, FOR A NIGHT OF THE STONE, AND THE STONE
OUR STONE, AND THE STONE WAS A NIGHT OF

THEN, IT WAS A NIGHT OF THE STONE, AND THE STONE
YAMNEN WAS A NIGHT OF THE STONE, AND THE STONE
YAMNEN WAS A NIGHT OF THE STONE, AND THE STONE
HE WAS A NIGHT OF THE STONE, AND THE STONE

